

Ask A Master Gardener
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Not So Lowly Liriope

Q: What can I plant under a big tree where grass won't grow?

There is no groundcover that I know that is as successful as liriope at surviving dreadful conditions. It is tolerant of shallow soil, drought, dogs, and deer. This Asian native can survive the occasional crushing by vehicles, kids and the disoriented delivery guy. Because it grows so thick, weeds rarely become a problem and little or no fertilizer is required. This plant is one of the best secrets to low-maintenance gardening.

Transplanting liriope is easy. A friend recently shared some excess clumps with me. I laid them on top of barely scratched earth and they never even wilted as they rooted in. I don't recommend this shoddy planting method but it illustrates how hardy the plant is. Monkey grass, as I have always called it, is the South's favorite ground cover and border. It's easy to find, simple to care for, usually evergreen, and tolerates heat. As a bonus, many types have showy flowers that add color to the garden.

Choosing the best variety for the job is important. Some types clump, and others creep. All monkey grasses fall into one of two groups: the genera *Liriope* or *Ophiopogon*. *Liriope* and mondo grass are widely used in landscapes. According to the University of Georgia, there are approximately five species of liriope, but the two most popular in the ornamental industry are *Liriope muscari* (Blue Lily-turf) and *Liriope spicata* (Creeping Lily-turf). *L. spicata* has a narrower leaf and tends to spread more aggressively than *L. muscari*. *L. muscari* is more common in the south, and is not as aggressive as *L. spicata*, tending to form tighter vegetative clumps.

There are approximately three species of mondo grass, with the most popular being dwarf mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*). Mondo grass is closely related to liriope and often confused with liriope. When compared to liriope, mondo grass tends to have narrower leaves and metallic blue fruits, and flowers are usually tucked into the foliage.

Liriope spicata spreads aggressively. It should never be planted in a mixed border with other small plants. It should be planted all by itself in a contained area, like the right-of-way between the street and the sidewalk or a steep, shady embankment where there's room to remove each year's unwanted spread without damaging any nearby plants, or in full shade, where its spread is less aggressive.

A better-behaved liriope is *Liriope muscari*, the "clumping" kind that does not spread by runners and basically stays where you put it. It blooms purple, not white like *spicata*, but it shares all the good qualities of the spreading kind — incredible toughness and adaptability — without the invasive behavior. And there is an especially attractive green-and-white variegated variety of this plant, which brightens up any shady spot.

Mondo Grasses are actually in the *lily* family. It grows in clumps which send out underground runners that slowly spread laterally to gradually fill in the areas in-between, giving the appearance after a few years of something a bit like a lawn. The basic type grows to around eight inches in height. Mondo grass lawns need no mowing, tolerate pretty deep shade and are very drought resistant. Dwarf varieties of Mondo grass are also used to fill in areas between pavers and stepping stones.

Another interesting variety is 'black Mondo grass', which despite its common name, is a different species of plant within the *Ophiopogon* genus. The leaves are about as close to true black as you'll see in the plant world, and it grows about as tall as true Mondo grass, but it doesn't spread much at all. I have used this variety in pots with yellow or lime foliage plants. It is quite striking.

Even though I have implied that you can hurl these hardy plants down on hardpan and they will thrive, I would encourage the prudent gardener to actually properly prepare a bed. You should first eliminate all vegetation with an application of a broad spectrum herbicide. The bed should then be fertilized, cultivated and mulched. Plant finger-size sprigs about 8 inches apart through the mulch. Or, if clumps are larger, space 1 foot apart, and water.

Both lirioppe and mondo grass will thrive with at least a yearly application of mulch and fertilizer. If possible, water when soil conditions are extremely dry. To encourage spreading, mow lirioppe or mondo grass to 2-3 inches early in spring before applying an application of fertilizer and mulch. Preemergent herbicides can also be used at this time to help prevent weed growth.

For more information or answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.