

Ground Covers for Georgia Landscapes

Gary L. Wade, Extension Horticulturist



Center: Japanese Spurge. Outside: Dwarf Mondo grass



Junipers planted on a bank.

Ground covers are spreading, low-growing plants used in landscapes to cover an area of ground. They may be woody plants, like junipers, or herbaceous perennial plants, like sedum or daylilies. Generally, ground cover plants are evergreen and spread by horizontal stems, stolons (above-ground stems that root along their nodes) or rhizomes (below-ground creeping stems that spread outward). For the purposes of this publication, plants that spread by seed or are taller than 3 feet in height are not considered ground covers.

Ground covers have many practical uses. Some can be used to control erosion when planted on slopes or banks. Others are effective lawn substitutes in areas that are too shady to support the growth of grasses or areas that are difficult to mow. Densely growing ground covers also effectively control weeds by blocking light from reaching the ground. Some ground covers can be used as attractive accents in areas too narrow to accommodate shrubs. One of the most common reasons for using ground covers is to reduce costly and time-consuming maintenance, such as mowing, edging, trimming and mulching.

Ground covers are also valued for aesthetic reasons. They soften harsh architectural lines of buildings and paved areas. When skillfully interplanted with trees and shrubs, ground covers impart a textural balance and unity to the landscape by bridging the gaps between trees and shrubs.

Selecting Ground Covers

One of the first considerations when selecting a ground cover is whether it is cold hardy for the area in which it is to be grown. Georgia has five cold-hardiness zones, according to the 1990 USDA cold-hardiness zone map. The zones are based on the average minimum temperatures of each region of the state.



Bath's Pink Dianthus

Cold-Hardiness Zones in Georgia



Range of average annual minimum temperatures for each zone	
Zone	Range in Degrees Fahrenheit
6b	-5 to 0
7a	0 to 5
7b	5 to 10
8a	10 to 15
8b	15 to 20

A second consideration is whether the ground cover prefers sun or shade. Some ground covers, like the horizontal junipers, must have sun. When planted in shade, they will grow poorly and become more susceptible to insects and diseases. Other ground covers, like cast iron plant, prefer shade and will often show foliar scorching when planted in full sun.

Another consideration is the mature height and spread of the plant. Desired height depends on the location of the groundcover in the landscape and the size of adjacent plants. How wide you can expect the plant to grow will determine how far apart plants are planted initially. Planting ground covers closer together than their recommended spacing is sometimes done to achieve a quicker cover, but it requires more plants per unit area and increases plant costs. Furthermore, when ground covers are planted too closely together they soon become crowded, compete for water and nutrients, and become more susceptible to insect and disease problems.

Planting Time

Container-grown ground covers with well-developed root systems can be planted most any time of year, provided the plants can be irrigated during establishment. Bare-rooted plants are best transplanted during the fall and winter months when temperatures are cooler, soil moisture is usually more plentiful and plants are not actively growing.

Planting

Proper planting is important for ground covers to grow and spread rapidly. A soil test done one month prior to planting will determine whether lime is needed and what type of fertilizer is best. Information on soil testing is available from your local county Extension office or online at <http://aesl.ces.uga.edu/soiltest123/Georgia.htm>.

If a soil test is not done, a general recommendation is to apply 3 pounds of a complete fertilizer, such as 10-10-10 or 5-10-15, to the planting area prior to planting. Use a rake to incorporate the fertilizer lightly into the soil. Most Georgia soils will benefit from the addition of organic matter, like compost or composted animal manure. Organic matter helps sandy soils hold water and nutrients, and it improves the porosity and water movement in clay soils. It also provides slow-release nutrients to plants. For best results, spread organic matter 4 inches thick over the area to be planted and incorporate it to a 12-inch depth.

Competition from weeds following planting can be expected, so be prepared to hand-weed as needed while the ground cover is getting established. A mulch like pine straw, pine bark or shredded hardwood applied 3 to 5 inches deep immediately after planting will help prevent weeds. A third option is to apply a pre-emergent herbicide after planting to prevent weed seeds from sprouting. Your local county Extension office can recommend a pre-emergent herbicide, if there is one labeled for use on the ground cover being planted. Sometimes a combination of hand-weeding, mulching and chemical application are necessary to keep weeds from competing with the ground cover while it is getting established. Once the ground cover spreads and shades the soil surface, weed problems should be significantly reduced.

Maintenance

Proper maintenance of ground cover plantings ensures good growth, rapid coverage and helps prevent weed competition.

Mulch any exposed areas between the plants. Mulches conserve moisture, reduce weed competition and help insulate plants from summer heat and winter cold. Pine straw, pinebark mini-nuggets and shredded hardwood mulch are commonly used.

Irrigate newly planted ground covers during establishment to maintain a uniform moisture level. Once established, irrigate them on an "as needed" basis. Some ground covers, like junipers, are extremely drought tolerant once they are established and require little supplemental irrigation. It is best to base irrigation needs on plant type, appearance, growth rate and rainfall pattern.

Newly planted ground covers are generally fertilized more frequently than well-established groundcovers to encourage rapid plant establishment and spread. Apply fertilizers during the growing season (March to October) when plants are actively growing. A general-purpose fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, applied at four- to six-week intervals at a rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet during the growing season will encourage rapid plant establishment. Broadcast fertilizer over the top of plants when the foliage is dry, then use a rake or broom the brush excess fertilizer off the foliage. Irrigate soon after application to dissolve the fertilizer and help it penetrate the soil. Base fertilizer applications for established plants on plant appearance and desired growth rate. Keep in mind that fertilizer stimulates new growth and may increase maintenance requirements of established plants.

Suggested Ground Covers for Georgia Landscapes

The following table shows some suggested ground covers for Georgia Landscapes. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list, but includes a variety of ground covers for different landscape situations. Most of the plants listed are readily available in the nursery trade. The table shows each plant's cold-hardiness zone, light requirement, mature height, mature width and growth rate under ideal cultural conditions. Additional comments that may help when selecting plants are also provided.



Stonecrop



Bugleweed in Flower



Dwarf Mondo grass



Dwarf Japanese Plum Yew



Blue Rug Juniper

Suggested Ground Covers for Georgia Landscapes

Common Name	Botanical Name	Light Level	Hardiness Zone(s)	Mature Height	Mature Spread	Growth Rate	Comments
Allegheny Spurge,* Mountain Spurge	<i>Pachysandra procumbens</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	6-10 in.	2-3 ft.	Slow	Pink flowers in spring
Algerian Ivy	<i>Hedera canariensis</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	8	8-10 in.	5 ft.	Med.	Not as aggressive as English Ivy
Asiatic Jasmine	<i>Trachelospermum asiaticum</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	7,8	3-6 in.	6 ft.	Fast	Can be aggressive next to other plants
Autumn Fern	<i>Dryopteris erythrosora</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	18-24 in.	18-24 in.	Med.	Turns bronze in winter
Bishop's Hat, Perennial Barrenwort	<i>Epimedium x versicolor</i> 'Sulphureum'	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	12 in.	18 in.	Med.	Creamy yellow flowers in spring. Likes uniform moisture.
Blue Lyme Grass	<i>Leymus arenarius</i> 'Glaucus'	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	24-36 in.	3 ft.	Med.	Drought tolerant
Bugleweed	<i>Ajuga reptans</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	3-6 in.	2 ft.	Med.	Blue flower spikes in spring
Cast Iron Plant	<i>Aspidistra elatior</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	7,8	12-24 in.	12-24 in.	Med.	A tough plant for shade
Carolina Yellow Jessamine**	<i>Gelsemium sempervirens</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	12-24 in.	10 ft.	Fast	Yellow flowers in spring
Christmas Fern	<i>Polystichum acrostichoides</i>	Sh.	6,7,8	12-24 in.	18 in.	Med.	Likes moist soil with organic matter
Comfrey	<i>Symphytum grandiflorum</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	12-18 in.	3 ft.	Med.	Creamy white flowers in spring
Common Rock Rose	<i>Helianthemum nummularium</i>	Sun	6,7,8	12-18 in.	3 ft.	Med.	Likes dry soil. Yellow cup-shaped flowers in spring.
Creeping Barberry*	<i>Mahonia reptans</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	12-36 in.	1-2 ft.	Med.	A tough plant
Creeping Raspberry	<i>Rubus calycinoides</i>	Sun	7,8	6-12 in.	2-3 ft.	Med.	Turns bronze in winter
Creeping Thyme	<i>Thymus serpyllum</i>	Sun, Part Sh.	6,7,8	4-6 in.	1-2 ft.	Med.	Often used between stepping stones
Daylily	<i>Heemerocallis sp.</i>	Sun	6,7,8	18-24 in.	12-18 in.	Med.	Many colors
Dianthus	<i>Dianthus gratianopolitanus</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	10-15 in.	12-18 in.	Med.	Pink spring flowers
Dwarf Japanese Garden Juniper	<i>Juniperus procumbens</i> 'Nana'	Sun	6,7,8	6-12 in.	2-3 ft.	Med.	Great for rock gardens
Dwarf Japanese Plum Yew	<i>Cephalotaxus harringtonia</i> 'Prostrata'	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	12-24 in.	3 ft.	Med.	Deer-tolerant plant
Evergreen Candytuft*	<i>Iberis sempervirens</i>	Sun	6,7	6-8 in.	12-18 in.	Med.	White flowers in spring
Foamflower*	<i>Tiarella cordifolia</i>	Sh.	6,7,8	6-12 in.	18-24 in.	Med.	Needs moist soil high in organic matter. White flowers in spring.
Hardy Ice Plant	<i>Delosperma cooperi</i>	Sun	7,8	12-18 in.	12-18 in.	Med.	Pink flowers in spring
Horizontal Junipers (Blue Rug, Blue Chip, Bar Harbour, etc)	<i>Juniperus horizontalis</i>	Sun	6,7,8	6-12 in.	2-3 ft.	Med.	Good cover for banks
Japanese Spurge	<i>Pachysandra terminalis</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7	8-10 in.	2 ft.	Slow	May take 3+ years to cover an area
Japanese Rooftop Iris	<i>Iris tectorum</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	12 in.	2 ft.	Med.	White or blue flowers in spring. Likes moisture.
Lamb's Ear	<i>Stachys byzantine</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	6-12 in.	12-18 in.	Med.	Prefers well-drained soil

* = native to North America

** = native to Georgia

²Part Sh. = Partial Shade, Sh. = Shade

Common Name	Botanical Name	Light Level	Hardiness Zone(s)	Mature Height	Mature Spread	Growth Rate	Comments
Lenten Rose	<i>Helleborus orientalis</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	12-18 in.	2 ft.	Med.	Many flower colors. Deer tolerant.
Lily-of-the-Valley**	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7	12 in.	1 ft.	Med.	White, fragrant bell-shaped flowers in spring
Liriope, Clumping	<i>Liriope muscari</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	6-12 in.	1 ft.	Med.	Many cultivars. Variegated forms are more sun tolerant.
Liriope, Spreading	<i>Liriope spicata</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	6-12 in.	3 ft.	Med.	Often used on shaded banks
Mazus	<i>Mazus repens</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	3-6 in.	1 ft.	Med.	Lavender flowers in summer. Likes moisture.
Mondograss	<i>Ophiopogon japonicus</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	6-10 in.	1 ft.	Med.	A dwarf form grows about 3 inches tall
New York Fern**	<i>Thelypteris noveboracensis</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	12-24 in.	2-3 ft.	Med.	Thrives in moist, shaded areas
Orange Coneflower*	<i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i>	Sun	6,7,8	16-24 in.	18-24 in.	Med.	Yellow flowers in spring
Plaintain Lily, Hosta	<i>Hosta sp.</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	6 in.-3 ft.	2-3 ft.	Med.	Summer flowers. Many cultivars.
Plantain Pussytoes**	<i>Antennaria plantaginifolia</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	6-18 in.	6-12 in.	Slow	White fuzzy flowers in spring. Thrives in poor soil.
Prostrate Germander	<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i> var. <i>prostratum</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	4-8 in.	2-3 ft.	Med.	Pink spring flowers. Drought and deer tolerant.
Prostrate Rosemary	<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i> 'Prostratus'	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	1-2 ft.	2-3 ft.	Fast	Pale blue flowers in early summer. Often used in rock gardens and for trailing over walls.
Shore Juniper	<i>Juniperus conferta</i>	Sun	6,7,8	18-24 in.	3-5 ft.	Fast	Often used on banks
Silver Brocade	<i>Artemisia stelleriana</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	12-18 in.	12-18 in.	Med.	Yellow summer flowers. Deer tolerant.
Southern Lady Fern**	<i>Athyrium asplenoides</i>	Sh.	6,7,8	20-30 in.	2 ft.	Med.	Plant in moist, shady woodlands
Southern Maidenhair Fern*	<i>Adiantum capillus-veneris</i>	Sh.	6,7,8	10-20 in.	1 ft.	Med.	Needs moist, organic soils
St. Johnswort*	<i>Hypericum calycinum</i>	Sun., Part. Sh.	6,7,8	12-18 in.	2 ft.	Med.	Bright yellow flower in summer. Cut back plants in late winter.
Strawberry Geranium	<i>Saxifraga stolonifera</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	6-12 in.	2 ft.	Fast	Likes moist, organic soil
Stonecrop	<i>Sedum sp.</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	2-12 in.	1-2 ft.	Med.	Many selections. Drought tolerant.
Sweet Woodruff	<i>Gallium odoratum</i>	Part. Sh., Sh.	6,7,8	6-12 in.	2-3 ft.	Med.	White flowers in spring. Likes consistent moisture.
Thrift, Moss Phlox**	<i>Phlox subulata</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	3-6 in.	1-2 ft.	Med.	Pink, white or lavender flowers. Often used on banks.
Variegated Ribbon Grass, Reed Canary Grass	<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i> var. <i>Picta</i>	Sun, Part. Sh.	6,7,8	2-3 ft.	2-5 ft.	Med.	Pale pink flowers in early summer. Can be aggressive. Cut back in summer.
Virginia Chain Fern	<i>Woodwardia virginica</i>	Sh.	6,7,8	2-3 ft.	3-4 ft.	Med.	Plant in wet, shady areas

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