

A close-up photograph of groundcover plants, likely a variety of Sedum. The leaves are small, rounded, and densely packed. They exhibit a mix of colors: some are a vibrant green, while others are a deep reddish-purple or magenta. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the leaves. The text 'GROUNDCOVERS' is overlaid in a white, elegant serif font, repeated three times in a slightly offset, stacked arrangement.

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## Introduction: The Carpet Layer

In many gardens, the space between the larger plants is treated as a problem to be solved - bare soil to be mulched, weeds to be pulled, an awkward gap to be filled. Groundcovers offer a fundamentally different answer: instead of suppressing the ground, they animate it. A well-chosen groundcover layer turns the space between shrubs and perennials into one of the garden's most dynamic, productive, and beautiful surfaces.

Groundcovers are low-growing, spreading plants that cover the soil densely enough to suppress weeds, protect roots, and create a visually unified surface at ground level. They range from flowering mat-formers to evergreen creepers, from fragrant herbs to fruiting natives - and the best of them do all of this while feeding pollinators, housing beneficial insects, and holding soil against erosion.

This issue brings together fifteen of the most garden-worthy groundcovers available to gardeners in temperate climates: seven featured in depth with full profiles, and eight more in a supporting cast covering the full range of site conditions from deep, dry shade to sunny, drought-prone slopes.

The best groundcovers do far more than fill space. Chosen well, the groundcover layer can be among the most productive and lowest-maintenance investments in your garden's long-term health. Whatever your challenge, there is a groundcover that will not just survive it; it will thrive.

## What Makes a Great Groundcover?

Not every low-growing plant makes a good groundcover. The best ones share a specific combination of qualities that go well beyond simply being small.

### Dense, Weed-Suppressing Habit

The most effective groundcovers grow densely enough to shade out weed seedlings once established and spread by rhizomes, stolons, or layering to fill gaps quickly.

### Seasonal Interest Beyond Blooms

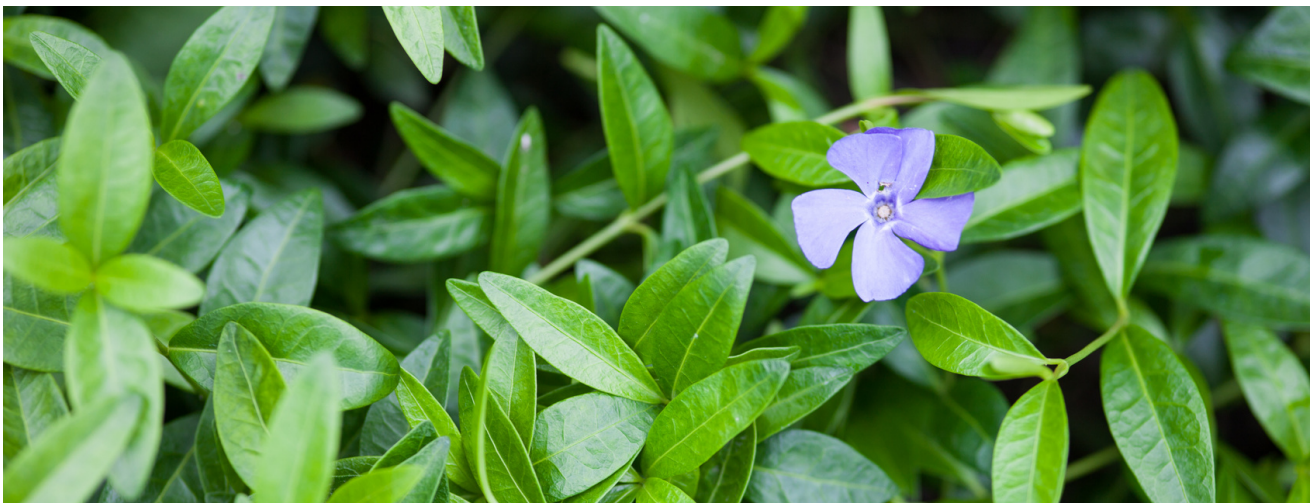
The best groundcovers earn their place through foliage - variegated leaves, interesting textures, autumn color, and evergreen winter presence - not just a brief flowering period during the spring season.

### Adaptability to Difficult Conditions

Groundcovers are often asked to solve problems: deep shade under trees, dry erosion-prone slopes, and compacted marginal soils. The best performers thrive where conventional plants fail.

### Ecological Value

Groundcovers offering nectar for pollinators, berries for birds, or structure for ground beetles and beneficial insects contribute far more to the garden ecosystem than those chosen for aesthetics alone.



## An In-Depth Dive: Featured Groundcovers

These seven groundcovers earn a full feature for their exceptional design value, ecological contribution, or versatility across challenging conditions.

### **Ajuga**; *Bugleweed*

#### *The shade garden's most reliable all-season carpet*

Glossy rosettes in bronze-purple, silver-variegated, or tricolor give year-round interest, even in dry shade. Spring brings upright spikes of vivid blue-violet flowers, loved by bees. Spreads rapidly by stolons and tolerates almost any condition.

Light: Full shade to full sun

Spread: Vigorous by stolons

Soil: Any; tolerates dry shade

### **Pratia**; *Blue Star Creeper*

#### *A fine-textured living mosaic for paths and stepping stones*

Forms an impossibly fine moss-like mat studded with tiny star-shaped pale blue flowers from spring through autumn. Creeps between paving stones with elegant precision, tolerates light foot traffic, and thrives in moist semi-shaded positions. An underused gem for the thoughtful garden.

Light: Part shade to morning sun

Spread: Moderate; non-invasive

Soil: Moist, well-drained

### **Fragaria chiloensis**; *Beach Strawberry*

#### *Edible, ecological, and ornamental - the complete package*

PNW native offering glossy, year-round foliage, white spring flowers, and small, intensely flavored fruit in summer. Spreads by runners into a dense weed-suppressing mat, excels on slopes, and doubles as an edible lawn substitute in mild climates. Birds and bees both benefit!

Light: Full sun to part shade

Spread: Vigorous by runners

Soil: Well-drained; drought-tolerant

## An In-Depth Dive: Featured Groundcovers (continued...)

### **Vinca major & minor; Periwinkle**

*This classic woodland carpet is tough, evergreen, and quietly beautiful*

Glossy, dark, evergreen leaves and periwinkle-blue flowers in spring thrive in deep shade under trees where little else survives.

Light: Deep shade to part sun

Spread: Vigorous; can naturalize

Soil: Any; drought-tolerant once established

### **Thymus; Creeping Thyme**

*Fragrant, bee-beloved, drought-proof carpet for sun*

Aromatic foliage releases scent underfoot, ideal between paving stones. In early summer, it becomes a carpet of flowers humming with pollinators.

Light: Full sun essential

Spread: Moderate; well-behaved

Soil: Thrives in poor, dry, well-drained soils

### **Leptinella; Brass Buttons**

*The most finely textured groundcover in the temperate palette*

Extraordinarily fine, ferny foliage grows almost flat to the ground, creeping between stones and tolerating light foot traffic.

Light: Full sun to part shade

Spread: Slow to moderate

Soil: Moist to average; good drainage

### **Lysimachia; Creeping Jenny**

*Luminous carpet for shaded corners*

Round coin-like leaves provide luminosity in deep shadow. Spreads by creeping stems that root as they go. Cascades beautifully from containers.

Light: Shade to part sun

Spread: Vigorous; water near water

Soil: Moist to wet; tolerates boggy

## Supporting Cast Members: The Full Palette

These eight additional groundcovers each solve a specific design or site challenge. Use them to extend the carpet into niche conditions or add contrast.

### Houttuynia cordata ‘Chameleon’; *Chameleon Plant*

Vivid red, yellow, and green multicolored foliage for moist part shade; spreads vigorously by rhizomes with a distinctive scent. Site carefully - it can be invasive in ideal conditions.

### Arctostaphylos uva-ursi; *Kinnikinnick*

Native North American sub-shrub; trailing mats of glossy, evergreen leaves, print-white spring flowers, and red berries for wildlife. Invaluable for dry, acidic, sandy soils in full sun. Slow to establish, extremely long-lived.

### Cotoneaster dammeri; *Bearberry*

Prostrate woody shrub with horizontal branches, white spring flowers, and brilliant red winter berries prized by birds. Ideal for slopes and banks. Tolerates poor soil.

### Delosperma; *Ice Plant*

South African succulents provide electric flowers in bright colors over grey-green foliage. Outstanding for dry, sunny, gravel, and rock gardens. Cannot tolerate wet.

### Cymbalaria aequitriloba; *Dwarf Kenilworth Ivy*

Miniature creeper with tiny, ivy-like leaves and delicate flowers that tuck elegantly into walls and paving cracks. Adds a naturalistic, aged quality to hard landscaping.

### Galium odoratum; *Sweet Woodruff*

Star-whorled leaves and frothy white spring flowers. Spreads steadily in shade without becoming invasive. Combines beautifully with woodland perennials.

### Veronica ped. ‘Georgia Blue’; *Speedwell*

Mat-forming speedwell with deep sky-blue spring flowers and evergreen foliage. One of the finest small-scale groundcovers for containers, edges, and border fronts.

## Design Strategies for the Carpet Layer

A garden without a deliberate groundcover layer is a garden half-finished. The carpet layer gives the vertical elements their visual foundation. Without it, the garden reads as a collection of objects. With it, it becomes a composition.

### Mono-Carpet vs. Tapestry Planting

A groundcover mass creates a calm, unifying plane. The tapestry approach mixes multiple species for a naturalistic surface, intermingled for a meadow-like carpet.

### Groundcovers by Condition

#### **Deep, Dry Shade**

- Best Choices: Vinca minor, Ajuga
- Notes: Amend soil with compost; water well to establish.

#### **Sunny, Dry Slopes**

- Best Choices: Arctostaphylos, Thymus, Delosperma, Cotoneaster
- Notes: Drainage is essential. Mulch until established.

#### **Moist Shade**

- Best Choices: Galium, Lysimachia, Houttuynia, Pratia
- Notes: Lysimachia and Houttuynia can spread aggressively.

#### **Between Paving**

- Best Choices: Thymus, Pratia, Leptinella, Cymbalaria, Veronica
- Notes: Choose traffic-tolerant species for walked paths.

#### **Edible/Wildlife**

- Best Choices: Fragaria, Thymus, Galium, Ajuga
- Notes: All provide nectar, fruit, or structure for wildlife

#### **Rock/Gravel Gardens**

- Best Choices: Delosperma, Thymus, Veronica, Leptinella
- Notes: Poor soil and sharp drainage preferred

## Establishment & Aftercare

Success almost always comes down to the establishment phase - get the first season right, and most groundcovers will require little to no ongoing care. Remove all perennial weeds before planting, improve soil with compost for moisture-lovers, space plants to achieve closure in 1-2 seasons, and apply a 2" mulch layer between plants to suppress weeds during establishment.

Once established, most groundcovers require very little: an annual tidy in late winter, prompt weed removal before seeding, and occasional watering in drought. Vigorous spreaders may need annual edge trimming.

\*An important note for invasive caution: Plants such as Vinca minor and Lysimachia have naturalized in parts of North America. But species such as Houttuynia can be very difficult to fully eradicate once established. Always check local invasive species lists BEFORE planting.

