

Ground Covers Beyond Vinca

Growing up we used Myrtle as filler in bouquets: my mother-in-law used periwinkle. Different states, same plant, *Vinca minor*, an evergreen ground cover for sun or shade with small leaves and bright lavender-blue flowers in spring and intermittently all summer. It is not a native but it has become so ubiquitous that both *Vinca minor* and *Vinca major* appear on the most recent lists of plants that have become invasive in Virginia. Time to change!

Ground covers are needed to hold soil in place and prevent erosion as well as to plant in places where grass will not grow well, on steep slopes or under trees. Ground covers are also useful as a background for spring bulb displays, helping to disguise the faltering foliage as the season progresses.

Pachysandra procumbens, Allegheny spurge, can be used to cover bulbs under deciduous trees. Bulbs need full sun and *Pachysandra* does better in part or full shade so it is not a marriage made in heaven.

If you are trying to simplify your life by reducing the time and money spent on an expanse of lawn, ground covers can be useful in shrinking your lawn. After using a hose to outline curves a foot or so in front of a hedge, shrub border, or perennial bed, cut a new edge with a sharp spade. All sorts of barriers are suggested to mark the line between ground covers and grass but I really think a spade is the easiest. A mulch will add to the appearance before the new additions fill in.

For shade and part shade, there is *Ajuga*, a dependable evergreen rosette of bronze or green foliage with late spring spikes of purple flowers. It spreads modestly and requires no care. For shade and part shade, *Heucheras* in an ever-widening choice of color are popular. Since you may wish to keep that rich expanse of green, muted greens or shades of silver, rose, purple, and chocolate might be better than the distracting bursts of orange/coral/ lime.

A cousin of *Heuchera* is *Tiarella cordifolia*, the foam flower. Both of these native members of the saxifragaceae family have wands of tiny graceful flowers but their foliage is a year round delight. You may also find the hybrid of the two, *Heucherella*, which has the advantage of growing in full sun as well as part shade. Two new cultivars are 'Tapestry' and 'Alabama Sunrise'. The flower panicles of the *Heucherella* seem more robust, but some gardeners tell me the plants with *Heuchera villosa* genes tolerate our heat and humidity more easily.

A charming ground cover for shade is *Cornus canadensis*, a true native dogwood. This bunchberry sports the typical dogwood flower facing upward on a plant only a few inches tall. The foliage becomes a deep red in fall. *Cornus Canadensis* prefers cool summers and may be difficult to establish, ergo, it will be expensive.

For dry shade, nothing is more elegant than the barrenwort, *Epimedium*. Small heart-shaped leaves are topped with pale yellow flowers in spring looking like little jester's caps. Other species have flowers in white, rose, or red. Another woodland native for shade is creeping wintergreen, *Gaultheria procumbens* with tiny white flowers followed by red berries. If you have a spot between buildings in sun or shade you just want covered, *Euonymus fortunei*, wintercreeper, will do the job. It is probably too invasive to be let loose near a garden but it will cover a strip between two hardscapes.

The list of ground covers for sun is extensive, including plants usually not thought to serve that purpose, such as *Nepeta phyllocllamys*. This four-inch tall catmint is grey with pale pink flowers, and draws bees, not cats to your garden. *Phlox subulata* is a fine plant for sunny places and the white or blue one is a compliment to yellow daffodils. The hot pink is a screamer but the fine ferny foliage of any of them is a plus all summer.

Delightful creeping *Dianthus* is another group that with small scale silvery foliage that flowers off and on all summer. They are called garden pinks but the term does not refer to the color although pink is one of the favorite dianthus shades. I have read that the term 'pink' refers to the zig-zag edge on the petals. They are also called Carnations and many of them are fragrant, clove-scented.

Several *Veronicas* are so low as to be ground covers. *V. prostrata*, prostrate speedwell is mat forming with several cultivars of wonderful blues but they do not last in long hot summers. Ice plants on the other hand love it here! Why they call *Delosperma* 'Ice Plant' when they survive along your hot driveway without a care? The foliage is succulent and the spidery daisy blooms cheery in several bright colors.

For white to cool a sunny spot try snow-in-summer, *Cerastium*. The foliage needs trimming back after it blooms to encourage further flowering. *Alyssum*, usually a school bus yellow, also comes in white and they are exceedingly generous bloomers, a trait not to be sneezed at.