



GREEN SPRING GARDENS

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RECOMMENDED GROUNDCOVERS FOR THE WASHINGTON, D.C. AREA

Groundcovers are relatively low-growing plants that spread out and cover the ground surface. Turfgrasses are the most common groundcover in sunny areas, but ornamental grasses, other herbaceous plants, and low-growing woody plants are widely used as groundcovers as well. They are attractive plants that add texture and color to the landscape while having lower maintenance requirements than many plants.

Groundcovers are frequently used in the following situations:

- as a lawn substitute in areas too shady to support turfgrass, such as under trees and next to buildings
- on slopes to reduce erosion
- as an underplanting with trees and shrubs to lower weeding requirements and to reduce the possibility of mower damage to the base of trees

The use of groundcovers can also be inspired by nature. Grasslands are natural communities dominated by native grasses. Grasslands in Virginia are mostly found in places with extreme environmental conditions or are maintained by disturbances such as fire or infrequent mowing. For gardeners who love naturalistic design and wildlife habitat, a meadow is the gardener's version of a grassland community. Meadows, or meadow gardens, are planted with a mix of native grasses and wildflowers. Meadows are cut down or mowed about once a year in order to keep them from reverting to woodland (burning can be used in less developed areas). See the brochure *Grasslands - Native Plants for Conservation, Restoration and Landscaping* for a list of native grassland plants for Virginia (published by the Natural Heritage Program of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation). This information is also available on their website (http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/documents/natvglnd.pdf).

The following are useful definitions:

- Cultivar (cv.) – a cultivated variety designated by single quotes, such as 'Pictum'. A **variety (var.)** or **subspecies (subsp.)**, in contrast, is found in nature and is a subdivision of a species.
- Full sun - 6 hours or more of sunlight daily.
- Part shade – the amount of light in an area shaded part of the day, among deciduous trees with high branches, among deciduous trees with foliage that is not heavy, or among thinned deciduous woods.
- Full shade – the amount of light under a dense deciduous tree canopy or beneath evergreens.

The following is a list of groundcovers that perform well in the Washington, D.C. area. Some plants are woody plants and others are herbaceous. Some of these plants are sun-loving while others are shade-loving. Plants that make good groundcovers spread a bit in general so don't let them crowd out less vigorous plants. Most of these plants prefer a moist, well-drained site. Most groundcover plants cannot be walked on like turfgrass or meadow grasses. Light requirements and special cultural requirements or tolerances are noted in the comments column. **Species that are native to Virginia are marked with an asterisk (*) and highlighted in red.** Native plant species are suitable for **naturalistic use**: examples

include informally-designed gardens that suggest a natural landscape and the restoration of native plant communities.

Exotic invasive groundcovers are a serious threat to natural areas and native plant communities and should not be grown in gardens. Exotic invasive groundcovers still sold in the nursery trade are listed at the bottom of this document, including English ivy and wintercreeper euonymus.

DECIDUOUS TO SEMI-EVERGREEN GROUNDCOVERS

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Anemone x hybrida</i> cultivars <i>A. tomentosa</i> 'Robustissima'	Japanese Anemone	Full sun (moist site) to part shade
<i>Asarum canadense</i> *	Wild Ginger	Part shade to full shade in consistently moist sites; light reseeding
<i>Aster</i> – see under <i>Eurybia</i> * & <i>Symphotrichum</i> *		
<i>Athyrium felix-femina</i> *	Lady Fern	Light shade to full shade; good for naturalistic design – spreads around a reasonable amount by reproducing from spores; this species & the following tolerate alkaline soil (pH above 7)
<i>A. niponicum</i> 'Pictum' & other cultivars	Japanese Painted Fern	Light shade to part shade
<i>Carex pensylvanica</i> *	Pennsylvania Sedge	Full sun (moist sites) to full shade; tolerates dry sites; semi-evergreen; light reseeding
<i>C. siderosticha</i> 'Variegata'	Creeping Variegated Broad-leaved Sedge	Light shade to part shade
<i>Ceratostigma plumbaginoides</i>	Leadwort	Full sun to light shade; best in moist sites; combines well with winter & spring blooming bulbs – cut down spent leadwort foliage before bulb foliage comes up
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i> *	River Oats	Full sun to part shade; reseeds heavily in moist sites – best for naturalistic use
<i>Chelone obliqua</i> *	Pink Turtlehead	Full sun to light shade in moist to wet sites; small scale groundcover

<i>Coreopsis verticillata</i> * 'Grandiflora' & 'Zagreb'	Threadleaf Coreopsis	Full sun; tolerates dry sites
<i>Dennstaedtia punctilobula</i> *	Hay-scented Fern	Light shade to part shade; tolerates relatively dry sites; best for naturalistic use –spreading habit
<i>Diervilla lonicera</i> *	Northern Bush Honeysuckle	Full sun to light shade; tolerates dry sites; naturalistic use - host plant for snowberry clearwing moth, a type of hummingbird moth
<i>Dryopteris goldiana</i> *	Goldie's Fern	Light shade to part shade
<i>Epimedium rubrum</i> (semi-evergreen to deciduous) & <i>E. versicolor</i> 'Sulphureum' (usually at least semi-evergreen in our area, & evergreen in mild winters)	Epimedium, Fairy Wings	Light shade to part shade best; tolerate dry sites
<i>Eurybia divaricata</i> * (<i>Aster divaricatus</i>)	White Wood Aster	Light shade to full shade; reseeds readily – best for naturalistic use; tolerates dry sites
<i>Forsythia</i> Gold Tide ('Courtasol')	Gold Tide Forsythia	Full sun for best bloom
<i>Helianthus divaricatus</i> *	Woodland Sunflower	Full sun to light shade (not as dense in part shade); tolerates dry sites; good for naturalistic use
<i>Hosta</i> species, hybrids, & cultivars	Hosta	Light shade to part shade best; plants with solid green foliage will tolerate full shade better than variegated forms; loved by deer – only for gardens without deer
<i>Iris tectorum</i>	Roof Iris	Full sun to light shade for best bloom; tolerates dry sites; usually semi-evergreen; light reseeding
<i>Itea virginica</i> * Little Henry (‘Sprich’) – the species & cultivars like 'Henry's Garnet' are taller	Little Henry Virginia Sweetspire	Full sun to part shade; tolerates wet & dry sites
<i>Jasminum nudiflorum</i>	Winter Jasmine	Full sun; tolerates dry sites; not fragrant
<i>Pachysandra procumbens</i> (‘Forest Green’) - native of WV, NC, & other states	Alleghany Spurge	Light shade to full shade; usually semi-evergreen
<i>Packera aurea</i> * (<i>Senecio aureus</i>)	Golden Ragwort	Full sun to part shade; moist to wet sites; reseeds readily – good for naturalistic use; semi-evergreen

<i>Panicum virgatum</i> * (‘Heavy Metal’, ‘Northwind’, & ‘Rotstrahlbusch’ are some of the best cultivars for groundcover use)	Switchgrass	Full sun; tolerates dry or wet sites; a tall groundcover; some reseeding; good for more formal gardens & for naturalistic use
<i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i> (‘Cassian’ & ‘Hameln’) <i>P. orientale</i> (‘Karley Rose’)	Fountain Grass Hardy Oriental Fountain Grass	Full sun; tolerate dry sites; light reseeding Note: black-flowered cultivars of <i>P. alopecuroides</i> like ‘Moudry’ reseed excessively – don’t grow these forms
<i>Phegopteris decursive-pinnata</i> (<i>Thelypteris decursive-pinnata</i>) <i>P. hexagonoptera</i> * (<i>Thelypteris hexagonoptera</i>)	Japanese Beech Fern Broad Beech Fern	Light shade to part shade; <i>P. hexagonoptera</i> tolerates full shade
<i>Polygonatum odoratum</i> ‘Variegatum’	Variegated Japanese Solomon’s Seal	Light shade to part shade Note: native <i>P. biflorum</i> var. <i>commutatum</i>* functions more as a garden perennial – not as dense
<i>Pycnanthemum muticum</i> *	Mountain Mint	Full sun to light shade; tolerates dry sites; can spread rapidly in moist sites
<i>Rhus aromatica</i> * ‘Gro-low’	Gro-Low Sumac	Full sun; tolerates dry sites
<i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i> * (var. <i>speciosa</i> * & ‘Goldsturm’)	Orange Coneflower	Full sun to light shade; prefers moist sites but will survive in drier sites; good for more formal uses & for naturalistic use; some reseeding
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i> * (‘The Blues’ is a lovely cultivar but needs sandier, dry soils to minimize flopping)	Little Bluestem	Full sun; tolerates dry sites; some reseeding; wonderful for wildlife gardens, more formal native plant gardens, & waterwise gardens, as well as naturalistic use
<i>Solidago sphacelata</i> * ‘Golden Fleece’	Golden Fleece Goldenrod	Full sun to part shade; tolerates dry sites; small scale groundcover
<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i> *	Prairie Dropseed	Full sun; tolerates dry sites
<i>Stephanandra incisa</i> ‘Crispa’	Cutleaf Stephanandra	Full sun to light shade; tolerates dry sites
<i>Symphotrichum cordifolium</i> * (<i>Aster cordifolius</i>)	Heart-leaved Aster	Light shade to full shade; tolerates dry sites; reseeds readily - best for naturalistic use
<i>Symphytum grandiflorum</i>	Ground Comfrey	Full sun (moist sites) to part shade
<i>Thelypteris noveboracensis</i> *	New York Fern	Light shade to full shade; naturalistic use – spreading habit

<i>Tiarella cordifolia</i> * - 'Oakleaf' & 'Slickrock' have been longer lived than most of the newer cultivars with deeply cut leaves, darker leaves, &/or pink flowers.	Foamflower	Light shade to part shade in consistently moist sites; can be semi-evergreen Note: spreading form <i>var. cordifolia</i> * is more vigorous & a much better groundcover than the clumping form <i>var. collina</i> * (<i>T. wherry</i>).
<i>Vancouveria hexandra</i> (western U.S. native)	Vancouveria, White Insideout Flower	Light shade to full shade; moist sites preferred but can tolerate some dry periods in the summer
<i>Viola canadensis</i> *	Canadian Violet, Tall White Violet	Light shade to part shade; naturalistic use – reseeds readily
<i>V. pubescens</i> *	Downy Yellow Violet	Light shade to part shade; some reseeding; naturalistic use best
<i>V. striata</i> *	Striped Cream Violet	Full sun (moist sites) to part shade; naturalistic use – spreads readily & some reseeding
<i>Xanthorhiza simplicissima</i> *	Yellowroot	Light shade to part shade; adaptable to dry, moist, or occasionally flooded sites

Note: Some short disease-resistant roses can function as groundcovers, such as Magic Meidiland (patented). However, they are difficult to weed among due to their thorns. Therefore, they are best used in small areas.

EVERGREEN GROUNDCOVERS

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Abelia x grandiflora</i> 'Compacta' & 'Little Richard'	Glossy Abelia – Compact Forms	Full sun to light shade; tolerates dry sites
<i>Carex morrowii</i> 'Goldband' & 'Variegata'	Morrow Sedge	Light shade to part shade Note: 'Ice Dance' spreads rapidly & is not very attractive.
<i>C. plantaginea</i> *	Plantainleaf Sedge	Light shade to full shade; tolerates dry sites in rich soil; semi-evergreen to evergreen; some reseeding
<i>Cotoneaster salicifolius</i> & cultivars such as 'Scarlet Leader'	Creeping Willowleaf Cotoneaster	Full sun to light shade
<i>Dryopteris erythrosora</i>	Japanese Shield Fern, Autumn Fern	Light shade to part shade; tolerates dry sites

<p><i>Epimedium x perralchicum</i> ‘Frohnleiten’ (parents of this hybrid are <i>E. perralderianum</i> & <i>E. pinnatum</i> – less showy but good garden plants)</p> <p>Note: <i>E. versicolor</i> ‘Sulphureum’ – evergreen in mild winters but often semi-evergreen</p>	Epimedium	Full sun (moist site) to part shade best; tolerate dry sites
<p><i>Euphorbia amygdaloides</i> (often sold as var. <i>robbiae</i> - no longer considered to be a valid name)</p>	Robb’s Spurge	Light shade to full shade; prefers dry sites; sap causes burning of skin for some individuals
<p><i>Helleborus foetidus</i></p> <p><i>H. orientalis</i> & hybrids (<i>H. x hybridus</i>)</p>	Bearsfoot Hellebore Lenten Rose	Light shade to part shade; some reseeding to readily reseeding
<p><i>Liriope muscari</i> cultivars</p>	Blue Liriope	Full sun to full shade; <i>L. muscari</i> forms clumps; tolerates dry sites; keep away from natural areas
		Note: the species <i>L. spicata</i> (creeping liriope) is an aggressive spreader in gardens; naturalized in MD & other states – do not grow
<p><i>Lonicera nitida</i></p>	Box Honeysuckle	Full sun to light shade; needs regular pruning to keep it low
<p><i>Ophiopogon japonicus</i> (‘Gyoku-Ryu’ is a dwarf cultivar with lower vigor than the species type)</p>	Mondo Grass	Full sun to full shade; tolerates dry sites (dwarf cultivars are best in moist sites with at least some sun)
<p><i>Polystichum acrostichoides</i>*</p>	Christmas Fern	Light shade to full shade; tolerates dry sites
<p><i>Rhododendron</i> – Dwarf North Tisbury hybrids including ‘Joseph Hill’ & ‘Michael Hill’</p> <p><i>R. kiusianum</i> ‘Komo Kulshan’</p>	Dwarf Azaleas	Light shade best for optimum bloom
		Note: for native plant lovers the shortest native azalea is <i>R. atlanticum</i> * (coast azalea) – a small shrub that is taller than the above cultivars.

<i>Sarcococca hookeriana</i> [var. <i>humilis</i> - Gold Medal Award; Gold Medal Plant Awards are given annually by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society to underused woody plants that perform especially well in gardens from New York City to Washington, D.C.]	Dwarf Sarcococca, Dwarf Sweet Box	Light shade to full shade
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Grow With Caution Due To Exotic Invasive Potential (Non-Natives That Sometimes Spread Excessively And/ Or Reseed Abundantly):

<i>Eomecon chionantha</i>	Snow Poppy	Aggressive spreader in gardens but has not reseeded outside the area it was originally planted in
<i>Galium odoratum</i>	Sweet Woodruff	Light shade to part shade. Keep away from natural areas – USDA lists this species in VA & naturalized in PA, NJ, & other states.
<i>Liriope spicata</i>	Creeping Liriope	Aggressive spreader in gardens; naturalized in MD & other states; grow <i>L. muscari</i> (a clumper) instead
<i>Oenothera speciosa</i>	Pinkladies, Pink Sundrop	Aggressive spreader in gardens; native to south central U.S. & naturalized in VA & many states. Note: Also sold under the invalid name of <i>O. berlanderi</i> ('Siskiyou' is often sold under this name – no such species).
<i>Pachysandra terminalis</i>	Japanese Spurge	Light shade to part shade; naturalized in VA – keep away from natural areas
<i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i> – black-flowered cultivars like 'Moudry'	Black-flowered Fountain Grass	Do not grow these black-flowered forms due to heavy reseeding; buff-colored cultivars are much better behaved & only lightly reseed
<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i> 'Feesey'	Feesey Ribbon Grass	The Eurasian form of this species, commonly called reed canarygrass, has displaced the native form in VA & throughout most of the U.S. Variegated cultivars like 'Feesey' have a vigorous spreading habit but are not as invasive as the species. I have removed from my gardens; keep away from natural areas.

Exotic Invasive Species Available in the Nursery Trade (Heavy Reproduction Rates In Our Region):

***Aegopodium podagraria* (Goutweed; 'Variegatum' - the form in the nursery trade) – naturalized in VA & aggressive spreader in gardens.**

***Ajuga reptans* & cultivars (Bugleweed)** – VA exotic invasive list.

***Euonymus fortunei* (Wintercreeper Euonymus)** – VA exotic invasive list. Both a groundcover & a vine.

***Hedera helix* (English ivy)** – VA exotic invasive list. Both a groundcover & a vine.

***Hemerocallis fulva* (Orange Daylily)** – naturalized in VA & hard to kill; a common pass-along plant; grow other species & cultivars instead as garden perennials.

***Lonicera japonica* ‘Halliana’ (Hall’s Honeysuckle – a cultivar of Japanese Honeysuckle; still available from mail order nurseries)** – VA exotic invasive list. Both a groundcover & a vine.

***Lysimachia clethroides* (Gooseneck Loosestrife)** - very invasive in gardens & has naturalized in TN, KY, NC, & other states.

***Lysimachia nummularia* (Moneywort; ‘Aurea’ is most commonly sold – Golden Creeping Jenny)** - species is on VA exotic invasive list & I have removed ‘Aurea’ from my gardens due to aggressive spreading habit.

***Securigera varia* (*Coronilla varia*; Crownvetch)** – VA exotic invasive list. Widely used in highway projects but have heard of some individuals growing it in gardens.

***Vinca minor* & *V. major* (Periwinkle)** – VA exotic invasive list. Seldom reproduce from seed, but aggressive spreaders (especially *V. minor* in our area; variegated cultivars of *V. major* are the most commonly grown form of that species but not very ornamental).

A Note About Naturalized Plants and Exotic Invasive Plants:

Naturalized plants are non-native plants which have succeeded in reproducing and spreading to a limited extent on their own. Most naturalized plants are not a serious threat to native species or to native plant communities. Naturalized non-native plant species in our region are noted in the **USDA PLANTS Database** (<http://plants.usda.gov/>).

A small percentage of naturalized plants become invasive. Exotic invasive plants reproduce quickly, displace native plant species, and are difficult to eradicate. The **Division of Natural Heritage in the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation** lists exotic invasive plant species in Virginia on their website (http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/documents/invlist.pdf).

A Note about Scientific Names:

Current names are from the **International Plant Names Index** (IPNI; www.ipni.org/index.html) and/or the **USDA PLANTS Database** (<http://plants.usda.gov/>; this website also has many photographs of native plants). If a second scientific name is given, it is usually an old name that is still seen in some references or used by some nurseries. The **Missouri Botanical Garden** is also an excellent reference for plant names, gardening information, and photographs: the **Kemper Center for Home Gardening Plantfinder** features plants in their Kemper Center display gardens and is one of my favorite websites about ornamental plants

(www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/alpha.asp). Another resource is their plant name database for plants throughout the world at **w³TROPICOS** (<http://mobot.mobot.org/W3T/Search/vast.html>).

© 2008. Developed by Brenda Skarphol, Curatorial Horticulturist; updated 2/2008 (Ground)





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