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Going native with your ground cover

by MARDI LETSON

Do you have a barren weedy trouble spot in your garden? Ground covers will add beauty to a garden and minimize maintenance by crowding out weeds and protecting the soil. Skip the exotic and potentially invasive options like English ivy, vinca, and pachysandra, and consider the many native plants that make interesting and colorful carpets under trees, along slopes, or at a garden's edge.

Native plants can add immeasurably to the beauty and diversity of your garden's ground layer. Planted areas of indigenous material will come alive by providing food and shelter for insects, birds and animals. When sited correctly, native species are better able to withstand regional

(Phlox subulata) has the familiar needle-like evergreen foliage and will tolerate hot, dry areas and drape beautifully over the edge of a wall. Wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), common blue violet (*Viola sororia*), wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), and tickseed (*Coreopsis pubescens*) are sun lovers that are easy to grow from seed. Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) has a trailing habit, helps with erosion control on slopes, and is beautiful in winter decorations. Woodland stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*) is easily grown and tolerates more shade and moisture than other succulents. Coral bells (*Heuchera americana*) produces airy flowers atop attractive foliage.



weather extremes than most alternatives. Plus, using natives eliminates the risk of introducing future invasives. Native plantings connect gardens to their broader landscapes and convey a sense of place and context that is important to good garden design.

As with all gardens, putting the right plant in the right place is essential to the long-term survival of your native groundcover. Before you make a wish list, assess the light, moisture and pH level of the soil and choose plants accordingly.

DO YOU HAVE A SUNNY SITE?

Consider the ebony spleenwort (*Asplenium platyneuron*), an evergreen fern that tolerates some drought. Mossy phlox

DO YOU HAVE A SHADY SITE?

Native ferns are a long-lived deer-resistant choice for both large- and small-scale ground cover needs. The durable maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*) sports delicate, lacy fronds. The New York fern (*Thelypteris novaboracensis*), netted chain fern (*Woodwardia areolata*) and hay scented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctiloba*) will rapidly colonize in the right conditions. Two terrific evergreen ferns are the marginal wood fern (*Dryopteris marginalis*) and Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*).

CRAVE A SHOWY DRIFT OF COLOR?

Consider the dwarf crested iris (*Iris cristata*) or wild sweet William (*Phlox divaricata*) which has a spectacular fragrance.

Delicate flower clusters of the white wood aster (*Eurybia divaricata*) are gorgeous under a tree in late summer. The easy-to-grow, semi-evergreen foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*) sports showy white flowers and lovely heart-shaped leaves often with reddish variegations that turn bronze in the autumn.

WANT A MAT THAT GROWS TIGHT TO THE GROUND?

Partridge berry (*Mitchella repens*) can add an interesting layer of tiny evergreen leaves, flowers, and fruit in a smaller bed. Barren strawberry (*Waldsteinia lobata*) is semi-evergreen with strawberry-like leaves and small yellow flowers that bloom in late spring. Green and Gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*), a versatile semi-evergreen workhorse of a groundcover, tolerates most conditions and produces delicate little yellow flowers. Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*) has larger, mottled leaves than its Asian cousin pachysandra and tolerates drought and deep shade. Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*) requires consistent shade but, when shielded from the sun, it creates a dense mat of heart and kidney shaped dark green leaves that cover the small cup-shaped purplish brown flowers at the base of the stems.

ARE YOU AIMING FOR THE GRASS LOOK?

Native sedges (*Carex pensylvanica* or *Carex appalachica*)

are adaptable grass-like plants that add a whimsical hairy texture to the garden.

Spring ephemerals offer a pop of color or texture early in the growing season. Low maintenance Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) produce lovely blue flowers in spring and can live for decades. Mayapples (*Podophyllum peltatum*), jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*) and trillium (*Trillium*) create beautiful but fleeting carpets of leaves and flowers. Because ephemerals go dormant in summer, consider pairing a mass of them with attractive foliage to add interest later.

Many local and mail order nurseries carry good selections of natives. Ruth Gonzalez of Reems Creek Nursery warns not to gather plants from the wild, because many species are endangered and digging can destroy native colonies. Also, many natives transplant poorly.

For design ideas, remember that the most beautiful uses of native plants imitate nature. Visit local natural habitats to see how native plants naturally occur. Or stroll the paths of the Botanical Gardens at Asheville where the staff has created small vignettes replicating habitats within the Smokey Mountains. BGA garden manager Jay Kranyik says, "Using natives is an homage to the rich biodiversity of the Southern Appalachians. We provide a space for inspiration and education, to help folks celebrate our natural heritage and not add to the problem of invasive exotics which cost the U.S. billions of dollars a year."



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