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Horticulture and Crop Science

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Ground Covers for the Home Landscape

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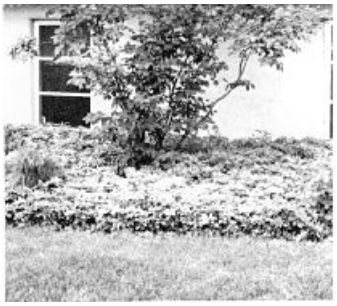

Ground covers are low-growing plants that spread over an area. They often are used to solve a problem with erosion or maintenance of steep slopes. Where shade is too dense for growing turfgrass, ground covers are suggested. Ground covers are recommended around trees when the tree's roots are at the surface and cause mowing problems.

Ground covers should not be thought of only as a solution for problem areas. They can be used to visually unify divergent components of a landscape. They are used to soften the edges of walks, steps and drives. As a foreground, a ground cover can be the unifying factor in a collection of plants.

A ground cover defines space. It gives a crisp, permanent definition to the form of a garden. A low ground cover provides a transition between the lawn and taller plants. The aesthetic qualities of ground covers include attractive foliage, colorful flowers and bright fruits. Careful selection of a ground cover will add to the year-round beauty of your landscape.

Soil Preparation

Turfgrass and other vegetation should be removed when preparing a site for planting. The grass may be killed using an herbicide or by covering it with a sheet of plastic. Once dead, most vegetation can be turned into the soil, adding organic matter. Turfgrass also may be removed by undercutting the sod. Thoroughly removing grasses and weeds from an area before planting ground covers reduces, but does not eliminate, future weeding.

The soil should be tilled to a depth of 6 inches or more, except in areas where tree roots

are growing. Heavy clay and porous, sandy soils are improved by adding as much as 30% organic matter and working it into the top 6 inches of soil. This will improve aeration, and water penetration and infiltration.

Test the soil for pH and nutrient levels before planting. The amendments recommended on the soil test results should be added and worked into the soil. This is especially important if phosphorus is low, since it does not move readily through the soil.

Planting

Most ground covers can be planted anytime during the growing season; however, spring and fall are preferred because of the more nearly ideal growing conditions. Summer planting may require significant irrigation.

The ideal ground cover is a vigorous grower that will quickly fill in the area, shading out weeds. Selecting a plant adapted to the conditions of the site results in vigorous growth. Woody ground covers are planted slightly closer than the mature spread of the plant. Closer planting results in the area being filled in faster, but is unnecessary if proper preparation and maintenance are followed.

Maintenance

Newly planted ground covers require regular irrigation. Under normal circumstances, 1 inch of water applied every 5 to 7 days is adequate for establishing new plants. Check the soil in the root zone. When it is dry, apply enough water so that the soil is moist to a depth of 4 to 6 inches.

Two to 3 inches of organic mulch will reduce evaporation of moisture from the soil and help reduce invasion by weeds. Well-aged shredded hardwood bark, humus, cocoa bean hulls and well-aged wood chips may be used.

Weeding is required until the plants grow together. Hand weeding is probably the best option. A few pre-emergent herbicides are labeled for use in specific ground covers. It is critical that you read the label before applying these. Your specific ground cover must be listed for safe and legal use of the product.

There are no post-emergent herbicides available to a non-licensed person for use in ground covers. Some perennial weeds, such as thistle and bindweed, are difficult to remove by handweeding because of regeneration from root fragments. These may be treated with a nonselective broadleaf herbicide applied with a brush, cloth or wick applicator. Care is advised since these herbicides will kill the ground cover if it is applied to their foliage.

Fertilization of ground covers is ideally based on soil test analysis. Otherwise, a general recommendation is 1 to 1 1/2 pounds of 16-8-8 analysis fertilizer per 100 square feet applied annually in the fall or early spring.

Table 1.
