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1-1-1998

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Recommended Citation
Hinkamp, Dennis, "Ground Cover: The Next Best Thing to Cement" (1998). *All Archived Publications.* Paper 926.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histall/926

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GARDEN NOTES

GROUND COVER: THE NEXT BEST THING TO CEMENT

By Dennis Hinkamp

November 1998 Fall-13

You want carefree, weed free yard, build a basketball court. The next best thing is a good ground cover.

Ground covers are low-growing plants that reach a height of no more than 12 to 18 inches, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. They are plants that generally cover the ground sufficiently enough to choke out most weeds and hide the ground below them. Most ground covers do not however, choke out all weeds, and can be a real maintenance nightmare if not established and grown properly.

Remembering a couple of things when working with ground covers will keep the maintenance to a minimum and help the plants establish themselves quickly, Goodspeed explains. The most important consideration is to start with good soil. Although many ground covers will grow under poor soil conditions, all spread quicker and are healthier in a fertile, well drained soil.

"Work plenty of organic matter into the area before planting," he says. "Sawdust, manures, compost, leaves and other additives will greatly improve the soil. Add as much as possible."

Control as many of the weeds as possible before planting the ground cover, Goodspeed adds. If possible, let the ground sit for a couple of weeks after preparing it to allow weeds to emerge. Spray these weeds with a weed killer before planting. If the area is overrun with weeds, consider using a physical weed barrier.

"Be certain that what is planted is adaptable to our area and the sunlight exposure they will receive," Goodspeed says. "In a shady location, a ground cover such as junipers that require full sun will never do well. The same holds true of putting a shade-loving ground cover in full sun."

All ground covers take some time to establish, he says. The first two to three years are critical in their maintenance. Be certain to give them all the water and fertilizer they need. Provide ground covers with optimal growing conditions, so they will be better able to out-compete the weeds. However, be certain not to over water.

"Many people plant ground covers in shady areas where not much else will grow," Goodspeed explains. "Some of my favorite shade-loving ground covers include creeping Oregon grape, English ivy, lambs ear, Periwinkle and winter creeper. All of these plants fill in thickly and crowd out most weeds. The Oregon grape and periwinkle have nice flowers, and the lambs ear is noted for its fuzzy blue/grey foliage."

If the area is in full sun plant ground cover junipers, bearberry, snowinsummer, sun rose and some of the low growing cotoneasters, he suggests. Lambs ear can also be grown in full sun. If planting junipers, use those that are low growing and have an attractive turquoise, blue, yellow or light green foliage.

Use a weed barrier when planting junipers or cotoneasters, Goodspeed says. Many of the other ground covers spread by rhizomes or stolons and need to be in contact with the soil to fill in properly. They can be mulched with an organic mulch to reduce weed growth and improve the soil.

"There are many other ground cover plants such as sedum, ajuga, thyme, Irish and Scotch moss, spotted dead nettle, and sweet woodruff," he says. "However, these plants are great for small areas, but not for a major planting. Plant them in combination with other perennials and they will look great and out-compete many weeds in a smaller planting. Always remember, though, that ground covers will not cure every problem, nor out-compete with every weed. They require some maintenance and extra work for their true beauty to be seen."

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 9 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/11/1998/DF)