



UNIVERSITY OF  
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IFAS EXTENSION

## Ground Covers for Florida Homes <sup>1</sup>

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Ground covers enhance the beauty and usefulness of a landscape. They create interesting contrasts in texture and color, and are often the most unifying element in a total planting.

The term "ground cover" refers to any plant material low to the ground that can be used to cover areas where grass will not grow or is not desired. Ideally, a good ground cover should be evergreen and provide a permanent covering.

The practical benefits of ground covers are numerous. Some do well in difficult to maintain areas such as strips of ground between sidewalks, drives, or walls. Others provide barriers to foot traffic or prevent erosion on steep slopes. Areas of dense shade where grasses will not perform adequately may benefit from certain ground covers.

### Plant Selection

Important considerations in selection of ground covers are: plant type, growing conditions and maintenance. Plant type should satisfy aesthetic and practical needs of the landscape design. Plants used for ground covers vary from dichondra and lippia, which have characteristics and maintenance requirements similar to grasses, to low-growing,

spreading shrubs such as shore juniper and dwarf forms of yaupon, firethorn, and carissa.

Low-growing shrubs are particularly helpful in areas where foot traffic is a problem. Mass plantings of perennial flowers such as daylilies make effective ground covers that provide color at certain times of the year. Native plants such as gopher apple, partridge berry, and beach morning glory, have great potential as ground covers and should be encouraged where possible.

The growing conditions at the site should be determined before choosing a ground cover. Light intensity, drainage, soil and location in the state will have marked influence on which plants can be selected. Relatively few ground covers are adapted throughout Florida due to differences in winter temperatures from north to south. Though mild winters do occur throughout the state, tender plants such as creeping charlie and peperomia are not recommended outside of south Florida since a freeze would kill them. Similarly, woody plants, such as periwinkle and winter creeper, are restricted to northern Florida since they have a chilling requirement. Zones of adaptability for Florida ground covers are presented in Table 2 .

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Since one of the objectives of using a ground cover is to reduce maintenance in the landscape, it should be remembered that some plants used for this purpose can themselves become problems when allowed to overgrow their desired boundaries. Dichondra, creeping charlie, and varieties of wandering jew in particular may spread and become weed pests. These plants should only be used in isolated areas where they may be kept in bounds by sidewalks or other natural barriers or watched carefully and contained by hand. Ground cover plantings may also suffer from weed problems particularly when planted under or near trees that reproduce readily from seed. A ground cover is not recommended under cherry-laurel, camphor tree, sweet gum, and mimosa since the tree seedlings that develop in the cover are difficult to control.

## Ground Covers in the Landscape Design

Because ground covers are not isolated features in the yard, it is important to consider their effect on surrounding plantings as well as the general landscape. Ground cover plants vary in growth habit, texture and color, as do trees and shrubs, and thus should be placed into the landscape with care.

Though many interesting patterns may be created with ground covers, elaborate designs usually increase maintenance requirements. Thus ground cover areas should be kept as simple as possible in most home landscapes. This does not mean that the overall effect has to be dull or that some artistry cannot be expressed, but unnecessary curves and tight corners that are difficult to maintain should be avoided.

Following the principles of balance and repetition will help make ground cover areas effective as part of the landscape design. An example of balance is using a ground cover on the property lines at both ends of the lot to mark its boundaries. Balance may also be employed in the front yard to direct attention to the house by flanking the walk or drive leading up to the front door with ground covers. Even when the main purpose of the ground cover is to remedy a problem area, balance must be considered. Thus an area that is planted as a barrier to

foot traffic in one part of the yard (e.g., the corner of a sidewalk) may need balancing by planting another area in the yard with the cover (e.g., the corresponding corner). Repetition involves the use of the same or similar plants in similar areas of the landscape, for instance, ivy around trees in the front yard. Repeating ground cover areas in this manner can help unify the landscape and give the viewer a feeling of harmony.

Another way to achieve harmony in the landscape with ground covers is to use them as transition elements between dissimilar features. Low-growing, woody plants, such as weeping lantana and shore juniper, can be used to form a transition between the lawn and a row of larger shrubs. Vining plants, such as confederate jasmine and creeping fig, can be grown along the ground and then allowed to continue up a wall or over an embankment to cover harsh lines of structural features.

Color contrasts can be added to the landscape through the use of ground covers. The dark green color of Carolina yellow jessamine, liriopse and mondo grass combined with the light green color of a lawn creates a pleasing color contrast. Other ground covers vary from the dull green of common wintercreeper to the bright green of dichondra. Green is not the only color, however, since lippia may be greenish to purplish and purple queen (*Setcreasea purpurea*) is entirely purple. One type of wandering Jew (*Zebrina pendula*) has leaves that are purplish underneath and striped with green, white, and purple on the upper surface. A number of ground cover plants flower at certain times of the year and some, such as wedelia are highly prized for their flowers. Flower colors and flowering times for Florida ground covers are presented in Table 2.

## Establishing a Ground Cover

Preparation for planting begins with spading or rototilling the area where a ground cover is desired to loosen the soil and remove any other plants and buried debris. The site should be examined for possible problems. If any problems are discovered, they should be corrected before planting, or a ground cover should be selected that will tolerate existing conditions. A soil test to determine the pH (acidity or

alkalinity) and the fertility level of the soil may be useful, especially if grass or other plants have not grown well in the area. However, soil tests will not reveal the presence of insects, diseases, nematodes or improper drainage. If diseases or nematodes are suspected, the appropriate pesticide should be applied to the soil before planting.

It is a good practice to add organic matter (peat moss, compost, etc.) to the soil. Incorporating 2 to 3 inches of organic matter to a depth of 6 to 12 inches should be adequate. Also, 3/4 to 1-1/2 lbs. of a fertilizer containing nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium such as a 12-4-8 or 15-5-15 per 100 square feet should be thoroughly mixed into the soil before planting to improve plant growth.

Plants should be spaced to ensure that they cover the area as soon as possible. Plant spacing depends on the species selected. Small plants such as dichondra and creeping charlie may be set as close as 3-4 inches while large woody plants may be spaced as far apart as 4 feet. Table 1 shows the amount of area that 100 plants will cover when set at a given spacing.

Individual planting holes should be 2 to 3 times the diameter of the root ball and as deep as the root ball is tall. Plants should be set in holes so that they rest in the soil at the same level at which they grew in their containers. Place soil around the root balls. Immediately after planting, a thorough watering is essential. Newly set plants with poor root systems will require shading for a few days until they become established. A mulch of bark, wood chips, or other materials will be helpful in reducing weed problems and retaining moisture, especially if a slow growing ground cover is selected.

Banks or sloping areas usually do not require any special preparation unless they are very steep. In this case, a retaining wall should be built to reduce the slope and to help prevent erosion. Since sloping areas are often dry, a plant that will tolerate this condition, such as a juniper, should be used as the covering material.

## Ground Cover Maintenance

Like other plants in the landscape, ground covers will require proper fertilizing, watering, and weed

control to maintain their attractiveness. Newly planted areas will need special attention until they are well established.

Determine the amount of fertilizer to apply based on how fast you want full coverage to occur. Begin fertilizing 4 to 6 weeks after planting, then make one application around February (south Florida) or March (north Florida), another during May or early summer and a third application in September (north) or October (south). If rapid coverage is desired, make a fourth application during the summer months. A complete fertilizer such as 12-4-8 or 15-5-15 or a similar analysis applied at the rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet is adequate for ground covers.

Water requirements vary with different plants. Carolina yellow jessamine, for example, requires a fairly moist soil, while the fig marigold tolerates dry sandy soils with only occasional waterings to supplement natural rainfall. Water as needed and do not allow ground cover plants to wilt.

Weed control in ground cover areas is somewhat difficult. Preemergence herbicides (applied before weed seeds germinate) can offer some control if the correct herbicide is applied at the proper time and rate. Mulching and hand weeding will usually control weeds until the ground cover has become established. Once a planting is well established, the plants usually compete very well with undesirable plants.

**Table 1.** Area covered by 100 plants at a given spacing \*

Planting distance in inches	Square feet covered by 100 plants
4	11
6	25
8	44
10	70
12	100
15	156
18	225
24	400
36	900
48	1600
*Spacing calculated from the center of one plant to the center of the next plant	

**Table 2.** Florida ground covers

Name Common Name Scientific Name	Adaptability					Flowers	
	Height in inches	Light <sup>1</sup>	Zone <sup>2</sup>	Soil	Salt tol. <sup>3</sup>	Color	Season
Aloe <i>Aloe</i> spp.	12	S, PS	C, S	Any	H	Red, orange, yellow	Late winter, spring
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, seashores, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> An unusual medicinal plant. Spectacular flowers.							
Artillery plant <i>Pilea microphylla</i>	12	S, PS	S	Any	?	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, edging, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Grows vigorously with proper care. Excellent cover for patios and terraces.							
Beach morning glory* <i>Ipomoea pescaprae</i>	4	S	C,S	Well drained	H	Pink	Summer
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, seashores, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Grows wild on Florida beaches. Will grow to length of 50 feet and climb a trellis.							
Bromeliads <i>Bromeliaceae</i>	2 - 36	S, SH	C,S	Well drained	L-M	Some are very colorful.	Summer
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, edging, rock gardens.							

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<b>Remarks:</b> Not tolerant of dune conditions. Members of the genus <i>Cryptanthus</i> are often used as ground covers.							
Bugle weed <i>Ajuga reptans</i>	2, 12 at flower	S, PS	N,C,S	Well drained	L	Violet-blue, red, white	Early summer
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, edging.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Does not do well on sandy soils in central & south Florida. Sensitive to nematodes.							
Cape-weed, lippia matchweed <i>Phyla nodiflora</i>	3	S, SH	N,C,S	Any	H	Rose-purple, white	All year
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, seashores, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Easy to establish by sprigs or plugs. Tolerates some foot traffic.							
Carolina yellow jessamine <i>Gelsemium sempervirens</i>	6	S, PS	N,C	Moist	N	Bright yellow	Late winter, early spring
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Highly recommended for slopes, banks, and open areas. Slow growing. All parts are poisonous.							
Common periwinkle <i>Vinca minor</i> [Bigleaf periwinkle <i>Vinca major</i> ]	8 [12]	S, PS	N,C	Well drained	L	Blue, violet-blue, white	Spring, early summer
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, edging, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> One of the best covers for north Florida. Bigleaf periwinkle is especially useful for areas where perennial bulbs are grown.							
Confederate jasmine <i>Trachelospermum jasminoides</i>	6 - 12	S, SH	N,C,S	Any	H	White	April & May
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Long vine that cannot be trampled. Good for slopes and banks. Not recommended around trees and shrubs.							
Coontie* <i>Zamia integrifolia</i>	12 - 36	S, SH	N,C,S	Any	H	None	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, edging, seashores, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Palm-like. Prefers dense shade but tolerates sun well. Very heat & drought resistant. Cannot be sheared or mowed.							
Creeping Charlie <i>Pilea nummulariifolia</i>	1 - 2	S, SH	S	Well drained	?	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, edging, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Can become a weed problem.							
Cuphea <i>Cuphea hyssopifolia</i>	12 - 24	S, PS	C,S	Fertile soil	N	Red, white, purple	All year
<b>Uses:</b> Edging.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Good pot specimen. Adapted to bright sunny areas. Not drought tolerant.							
Daylily <i>Hemerocallis</i> spp.	12 - 36	S, PS	N,C,S	Well drained	M	Many	Late spring, summer
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Colorful flowers for borders. Relatively pest free.							

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Name Common Name Scientific Name	Adaptability					Flowers	
	Height in inches	Light <sup>1</sup>	Zone <sup>2</sup>	Soil	Salt tol. <sup>3</sup>	Color	Season
Dichondra* <i>Dichondra carolinensis</i>	1 - 2	S, SH	N,C,S	Moist	H	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, edging, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Will withstand some foot traffic. Mowing or shearing not necessary. Susceptible to a fungus infection.							
Ferns <i>Polypodiaceae</i>	12 - 36	SH	N,C,S	Well drained	L-M	None	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, edging.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Holly, Boston, leatherleaf, and sword ferns are recommended for ground covers.							
Figs <i>Ficus montana</i> , <i>Ficus pumila</i> , <i>Ficus sagittata</i>	12	S, PS	N,C,S	Any	M-H	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, seashores, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Creeping fig ( <i>Ficus pumila</i> ) and oak-leaf fig ( <i>Ficus montana</i> ) are good specimens that also can be used as climbing plants.							
Fig marigold <i>Glottiphyllum depressum</i>	6	S	C,S	Well drained	H	Yellow	Late spring, early summer
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, edging, seashores, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Withstands dry sandy soils and salt spray.							
Hottentot fig <i>Carpobrotus edulis</i>	6	S	C,S	Well drained	H	Yellow, rose-purple	Summer
<b>Uses:</b> Seashores, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> For covering sandy expanses, especially at the seashore. Very salt tolerant.							
Ivy <i>Hedera canariensis</i> , <i>Hedera helix</i>	6	SH	N,C,S	Moist	H	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, edging.							
<b>Remarks:</b> English ivy ( <i>Hedera helix</i> ) has somewhat smaller leaves than Algerian ivy ( <i>Hedera canariensis</i> ) and provides a finer textured planting.							
Junipers <i>Juniperus</i> spp.	6 - 15	S, PS	N,C	Well drained	M-H	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, edging, seashores, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Slow growing. Shore ( <i>Juniperus conferta</i> ) and creeping junipers ( <i>Juniperus horizontalis</i> ) are recommended for cover plants. Shore juniper is excellent for banks and slopes.							
Kalanchoe <i>Kalanchoe</i> spp.	6 - 18	S, PS	S	Well drained	M	Many	Summer, fall
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, edging, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Best used only in frosted locations. Easily propagated. <i>Kalanchoe pinnata</i> is invasive.							
Lantana (trailing or weeping) <i>Lantana montevidensis</i>	36	S, SH	C,S	Any	M-H	Red, purple	All year
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, edging, seashores, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Good for combination with junipers or jasmine. Subject to injury below 30°F. Fruit is poisonous.							
Lilyturf, liriopse <i>Liriopse muscari</i>	12	SH	N,C,S	Any	M	Blue	Spring, summer
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, edging.							

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<b>Remarks:</b> Creeping lilyturf ( <i>Liriope spicata</i> ) is a spreading form with purple to white flowers that covers faster than the common type.							
Madagascar periwinkle <i>Catharanthus roseus</i>	12 - 24	S, SH	C,S	Well drained	H	Red, blue, white	Summer
<b>Uses:</b> Banks and slopes, edging, seashores, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> An excellent flowering plant that thrives with little care.							
Mondo grass (dwarf lilyturf) <i>Ophiopogon japonicus</i>	6 - 12	SH	N,C,S	Any	H	Lilac	Summer
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, edging, seashores, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Flowers are usually hidden by the foliage. Excellent plant for full shade location.							
Partridgeberry* <i>Mitchella repens</i>	1 - 2	SH	N,C	Moist	N	White	Spring
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, edging.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Grows best in acid soils in the shade. Can stand some foot traffic. No mowing required.							
Peperomia* <i>Peperomia obtusifolia</i>	18 - 20	PS, SH	S	Moist	N	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Edging.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Will root along the nodes. Should be cut back once or twice a year. Also makes a good house plant.							
Purple queen <i>Setcreasea pallida</i> 'Purple Heart'	14	S, PS	N,C,S	Well drained	H	Pink	Summer
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, edging, seashores, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Especially well adapted for placement under trees. Leaves are purple.							
Selaginella <i>Selaginella</i> spp.	12	SH	N,C,S	Moist	?	None	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, edging.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Erect selaginella ( <i>Selaginella caulescens</i> ) is good for covers around trees. Blue Selaginella ( <i>Selaginella uncinata</i> ) is good for slopes.							
Small leaf confederate jasmine <i>Trachelospermum asiaticum</i>	8 - 12	S, SH	N,C,S	Any	H	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> One of the most elite of all ground covers. Forms a thick mat that eliminates weeds.							
Wandering Jew <i>Zebrina pendula</i>	4 - 10	SH	C,S	Well drained	N	Red, purple	Summer
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, edging, open areas, rock gardens.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Attractive leaves striped with purple, white, and green. Excellent for frostless locations. Also makes a good house plant.							
Winter creeper <i>Euonymus fortunei</i> var. <i>radicans</i>	24	S, PS	N	Moist	L	Inconspicuous	---
<b>Uses:</b> Under trees, banks and slopes, open areas.							
<b>Remarks:</b> Shearing may be required from time to time. Will not stand foot traffic.							
* Plants native to Florida							
<sup>1</sup> Light: <b>S</b> = sun, <b>SH</b> = shade, <b>PS</b> = partial shade							
<sup>2</sup> Zone: <b>N</b> = north Florida, <b>C</b> = central Florida, <b>S</b> = south Florida							
<sup>3</sup> Salt Tolerance: <b>L</b> = low, <b>M</b> = moderate, <b>H</b> = high, <b>N</b> = not tolerant, <b>?</b> - tolerance unknown							