

Groundcovers - Part I

By Cass Turnbull

Most gardeners think of groundcovers as masses of low-growing plants that carpet the ground. But it's a little more complicated. Groundcover plants can be shrubs (junipers, heathers, and such); self-seeding annuals or perennials (like sweet woodruff or violets); or clumping perennials (like Epimedium or ornamental grasses). Or they can be what I think of as "true" groundcovers: plants that spread by runners (above or below ground). Ivy, hypericum, ajuga, pachysandra, and vinca are in this class.

The Myth

Have you been told that "groundcovers will choke out the weeds"? Balderdash! On the contrary, the criss-crossing mats of stems can protect dandelion or grass roots from the would-be weeder's pokey-tool. It's one of the reasons I find myself hating vinca. Groundcovers also can preclude the use of pre-emergent herbicides, making a problem like "horsetail coming through the kinnickinnick" impossible to solve. This is why I am beginning to think these sorts of groundcovers are a bad idea for commercial sites with small maintenance budgets—and aren't they all?



Pachysandra terminalis

The Truth

Of course, there is some truth to the statement that groundcovers suppress weeds. But beware! If the newly planted groundcover and the weed grow up together, they will remain friends for life. On the other hand, when the groundcover has become a solid carpet, weed seeds will find no home. Either the seed lands on a leaf, or makes its way down to the soil, where it is shaded and cannot germinate.

Here's the 'take home message'. Be religious in keeping the weeds out for the first three years (or until the ground cover has become an uninterrupted carpet). It takes vigilance, but after that you will reap the benefits, i.e. no weeding! And if, in later years, you spot a bit of grass poking out of your creeping thyme, DO NOT pass by, pretending not to see it. Rather you must descend upon it like a wrathful and vengeful God and dig it out! No matter what. Even if it means digging up some part of your groundcover, you must destroy the intruder! (Actually, I find it a little refreshing to have a part of one's life where pig-headed intolerance is a good

thing.) Rest assured the groundcover will return weed-free. Whereas, if you ignore the weed, it will increase and become more vigorous, eventually infesting the entire area.

The Trouble with Groundcovers

The trouble with spreading groundcovers is the same as the trouble with many herbaceous perennials—they're either too vigorous or too puny. Knowing the details of your site is the key to choosing one that is "right".

The shade-loving ones sometimes creep out into the sun, where they look all yellow and scraggly (pachysandra, ajuga). Or sometimes you apply mulch to the beds to slow down the weeds, which it does, only to find that a nearby groundcover then colonizes an entire area where it's not welcome. Not only that, some spreaders are notoriously hard to eliminate once they have claimed a third of your garden as their own, like Hypericum (St John's Wort) and Sasa bamboo.

General Pruning and Care

Most of the spreading-type groundcovers like ivy, pachysandra, ajuga, and hypericum simply adore mulch. If you want them to increase and do well just add two to four inches of a sawdust-based compost over the ground and watch them take off. You can even spread it a half-inch thick right over an established patch, right after you have weeded it. Just make sure a goodly amount of the groundcover's green leaves pokes up through the mulch when you are done.

With the other sorts of groundcovers, like self-seeders and woody shrubs, mulching is a different matter. Since mulch reduces seed germination you should not mulch, say, your sweet woodruff patch. It would smother it. On the other hand, if your groundcover is made up of woody shrubs like juniper or heather, mulch won't hurt them. But remember - you must not bury the main stems or cover over the plants themselves.

A lot of groundcovers, and especially the 'stringy ones' like ivy, vinca, and lamium like to accumulate at the base of shrubs, slowly clogging up the base of the plant. It looks bad. Your main chore will be to get it out of the crowns of shrubs like azaleas and rhododendrons.

Don't be delicate. Use your hand pruners and gloves to cut and rip it out of plants. You will discover a marked improvement in the way your landscape looks. Creating definition between the layers of plants is one of the main purposes of pruning, as well as one of the best ways to create a sense of order in a yard that seems overgrown or out-of-control. While you're at it, think about removing a few of the lowest limbs on these shrubs. They are likely to be used as a ladder by over-achieving ground covers (and by morning glory and root weevils).

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

Sometimes your groundcover, say ivy or lithodora or vinca, has gone too far, to the edge of the bed where it bunches up unattractively. Perhaps it has totally obscured a rockery or spilled out into the pathway. It may have looked attractive at first, but eventually it becomes ‘too much’. Most people’s first reaction is to shear the plants back evenly with the edge of the bed, path or top of the rockery. There’s nothing wrong with that if it appeals to you. But if you want a more natural look, use a bit of selective pruning.

First, lift up the upper portions of the ‘rug’ and cut off the lower, or under-side, parts. Then drop the top back down. (Sort of the opposite of sweeping things under the rug.) Then snip what’s left in an uneven, sort of shag haircut manner, so that the planting mimics its earlier stage in development. The groundcover then cascades casually over the rockery, or it recedes back from the edge of the bed. Don’t be afraid of cutting off too much. It will all come back if you regret your decision. In fact, it will all come back—period.

About Hypericum (St. John’s Wort)

After ivy, the second most-hated groundcover is St. John’s Wort, *Hypericum calycinum*. (I know a gardener who hates it so much he won’t use the herbal remedy). It is extremely aggressive and difficult to get rid of once established. And it is commonly used. As the saying goes, “familiarity breeds contempt”. The first time I saw the flower, I thought it must have come from heaven, all yellow and silky and delicate. If you have fallen for it, and long to possess some, I recommend any of the *Hypericum* shrubs, which have the same pretty flowers as well as cool different colored berries. Unlike the spreading groundcover, the shrubs are considered ‘choice.’

The Trouble with Hypericum

In the Puget Sound area, both *Hypericum*s tend to get leggy after a while and develop black spots on their leaves. You can get rid of it and tidy up the planting by radically cutting the plant back to an inch or two off of the ground. (Yes, it is really scary looking!) Do it in the spring. By the end of the season, your shrub or groundcover will be back, with fresh clear leaves and flowers. When I worked for the Seattle Parks Department, we would lower the wheels on our mowers and mow the groundcover to an even swath of two-inch, ugly barren stems. Then we could get to the weeds, and then we sometimes added a light mulch. Everything grew back tidy and uniform, and looked great for several years.

About Salal

Salal (*Gaultheria shallon*) is one of our handsome native groundcovers. It creeps by underground stems and can be both too fussy (as in difficult to get established) and too vigorous, (since sometimes it spreads and can’t be stopped.) So, take care where you plant it. In some gardens it is the perfect accompaniment to the trees and shrubs—in others it becomes an overbearing house guest.

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

Old patches of salal can get too tall, woody, and leggy. Also, old salal develops a leaf crud of its own. Like ivy and hypericum, it not only withstands, but actually benefits from a radical renovation done every ten years or so. In the spring cut every single stem back to about an inch from the ground, two at most. People try to be nice by cutting higher— don't! It will look worse right after you do it, and the results won't be as good when it grows back. Trust me. In a year it will all come back, perhaps spreading more evenly and its leaves will be fresh and green and unspotted. As above, thoroughly weed the area while you can see the ground. Add mulch too while you're at it. Add extra irrigation if there is a terrible drought. But otherwise, don't worry, be happy.