



PHOTO BY TOM ROE

Geranium sanguineum cultivars make a wonderful ground covering for a sunny spot.

Covering ground

By Linda Roe

Ground cover is a relatively new concept in gardening. One hundred and fifty years ago, an English gardener would have given you a blank stare when you spoke about ground cover. Nor would he have understood the phrase “low-maintenance weed control.” We modern gardeners, however, have learned to “work smarter, not harder.” The easiest way to cut down on garden maintenance is with the use of ground cover.

Ground cover can be any plant that carpets the ground, whether shrubs, perennials, or a mass planting of one plant spread over a large area. The main function of any ground cover is to prevent weeds from growing. This sounds great, but if you want a ground cover to work for you, you will have to do a little homework.

First decide where it’s going to be planted, and to what purpose. Will it be a hot, sunny spot, or a dry, shady area under a large tree? Maybe you want a pretty ground cover in your flower garden, or a short, dense filler between walkway pavers.

With any of these situations, you must first prepare the soil before planting. Remove all weeds and work in some compost. Measure your area to determine how many plants you will need. The distance between plants will depend on the kind of ground cover and the size of the container it’s planted in. Determine how you will keep it watered.

Now you are ready to decide on a plant. Tough, evergreen ground covers such as juniper and cotoneaster make thick, spreading mats that are suitable for large areas and are a good choice for sunny areas. Slightly less aggressive but just as good would be creeping raspberry (*Rubus calycinoides*), or our native kinnikinnick. Creeping raspberry leaves turn burgundy in fall and kinnikinnick has pink bell flowers in spring.

Have you just put in a beautiful flagstone

path and need a between-stones filler? For a sunny path, elfin thyme is an excellent choice. The tiny leaves make a thick mat that blooms and is fragrant. Maybe you don’t have the sun and good drainage for thyme. Try blue star creeper, which has little blue flowers all summer. *Herniaria* is another lesser-known, tiny-leaved ground cover that would work well. Little brass buttons also work for the shade.

For gardens full of flowers that are prone to weeds, I’ve found that many of the hardy geraniums are excellent ground-covering, weed-smothering plants. Some of my favorites are *Rozanne*, which has big, blue flowers; *Biokovo*, which has white flowers and tidy foliage, and *Geranium sanguineum* cultivars. Some geraniums can reseed all over or have aggressive roots, so be careful.

Perhaps your yard is shaded. Your choices may seem more limited, but there are ground-covering plants that work just fine. *Vinca* is probably the most commonly planted, having bright blue flowers in spring. *Ajuga* is another familiar shade plant. *Sarcococca humilis* is a shrub like ground cover with shiny evergreen leaves and tiny scented flowers. It is often used in dry areas around the foundation of a house. It spreads by underground runners, so it is good for large areas. The biggest problem area in a shady site is the dry, root-filled shade under large trees. Try *pachysandra*, a tough plant often seen growing in the sidewalk strip under old street trees.

There are a few ground covers you should beware of. Bishop’s weed, Robb’s spurge, and *houlttuynia* can become pests quickly and should only be used when nothing else will grow. Don’t plant English ivy, which is now considered a noxious weed.

Ground covers can save gardeners a lot of work, but like any other plant, they need to be cared for until established. You will need to water and weed regularly. Once established, they make gardening easier for the gardening crew of one. ■

— Information courtesy of Wight’s