

Workhorse Groundcovers: Save Time, Money (and Water)

by Rachel Oppedahl

Much as I love putzing around in the garden, these days I am drawn to plants that do most of the work for me (and as an added benefit, save money). Drought-tolerant groundcovers that thrive in our foothills climate and soil offer a goldmine of low-maintenance, attractive landscaping options with many benefits. They need far less water than many ornamentals. They often require little or no fertilizer or products to battle diseases and pests. Many spread quickly, so gardeners don't have to break the bank to get great swaths of them. They help stop erosion. They act as a mulch to cool the soil and conserve moisture. And my personal favorite, they crowd out weeds.

One thing to keep in mind—even with drought-tolerant groundcovers—is that, like any young plants in your landscape, they need more water the first year or two in order to develop a strong root system to survive periods of drought. Given our tough water restrictions this summer, don't plant now, but consider planting these or other water-wise groundcovers in early fall, when the water you give them will soon be followed by cooler, wetter seasons.

Following are either western native or drought-tolerant groundcovers that make light work of routine gardening. Most grow six to 12 inches tall, but a few can reach 24 inches. The list is loosely organized by virtue: green year-round, flower power, foot-friendly, and those made for the shade.

Evergreens: Common but lovely are low-growing varieties of two of our California natives, California lilac (*Ceanothus*) with spring-blooming, smoky purple flowers that bees love and bearberry or creeping manzanita (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) with tiny, bell-shaped pink flowers and red fruit. Less common, low-growing wall germander (*Teucrium chamaedrys*) sports small, glossy, dark green leaves and teensy lilac flowers. There is a mind-boggling selection of succulent sedums, many of which flower in late summer or fall. Dwarf coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*) is one of the fastest-growing, toughest groundcovers around. Ground-hugging juniper and prostrate rosemary also offer hardy year-round green.

Dazzling Flowers: With all due respect to the flowering groundcovers mentioned above, there is nothing like the car-stopping appeal of these plants in spring and summer. Choose pink-flowering creeping thyme; snow-in-summer (*Cerastium*) with its carpet of white flowers; the daisy-like gazanias (pink, orange, white, red, purple); and trailing verbena, in as many colors. Also consider southwestern native Sierra sundrop (*Calylophus hartwegii*), which produces neon yellow, cup-shaped flowers on dark green, trailing foliage.

Foot-Traffic Friendly: A few drought-tolerant groundcovers will withstand some foot traffic, which is an added benefit in the garden. Native common yarrow (*achillea*), with its feathery foliage and white to pale yellow flower caps, as well as fragrant chamomile,

can be mowed periodically and used as lawn substitutes. Most thymes take light foot traffic, as do some of the small-leaved, mat-forming sedums.

Shade-tolerant: Grapeholly (*mahonia*) does just fine, thank you, in dry shade. It is an evergreen that has yellow flowers in spring and purple berries in late summer. Hummingbird sage (*salvia spathacea*), also an evergreen, produces spikes of pink to purple flowers. Sweet woodruff (*Galium oderatum*), with its star-shaped whorls of leaves and lacy white flowers, is actually an edible herb said to taste a little like vanilla and smell like freshly mown hay when the leaves are crushed. During times of drought, it does better in higher, cooler, woodland settings.

Here are some resources for doing your own research on groundcovers: University of California's "The California Garden Web" at www.cagardenweb.ucanr.edu; the local chapter of the California Native Plant Society at www.sierrafoothillscnps.org; the Tuolumne County Master Gardener hotline, 209-533-5912; or complete the "Ask a Master Gardener" form at http://ucanr.edu/sites/Tuolumne_County_Master_Gardeners/

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