

Workhorse Groundcovers Save Time, Money, and Water

By Rachel Oppedahl

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 out reliably, 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. Consider planting these or other water-wise groundcovers in late winter or earliest spring so they can establish stronger root systems during cooler, wetter weather.

Following are either western native or drought-tolerant groundcovers that make light work of routine gardening. Most are 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 our native California lilac (*Ceanothus*) with smoky purple flowers in spring that the bees love. Bearberry or creeping manzanita (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) has 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. Remember to keep in mind some these plants can be flammable so do not plant close to the house and keep them maintained.

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: pink-flowering creeping thyme; purple- and pink-flowered bellflower (*Campanula*); 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 Groundcover varieties of grape holly (*mahonia*) do just fine in dry shade. It is an evergreen that has yellow flowers in spring and purple berries in late summer. 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 <http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/>
The local chapter of the California Native Plant Society at www.sierrafoothillscnps.org.

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UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.