

# Groundcovers vs. Lawns

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## Goodbye lawn?

### Groundcovers: The Lawn You Don't Have to Mow

Groundcovers are a creative alternative to problematic grass lawns, or areas that are hazardous to maintain. Have you ever seen people doing daredevil stunts while mowing a steep hillside? I've seen folks holding onto a bush with one hand while guiding the mower with the other, even using a rope tied around the handle to pull it up and down a hillside. These are not safe practices, don't try this at home! Consider planting groundcovers, and say goodbye to (at least some of) your mowing chores.

Some groundcovers grow horizontally, creating a solid mass. They spread by rhizomes (horizontal underground stems which can send out shoots and roots) or above ground by stolons (stems that grow roots when they touch the ground.) Established groundcovers can crowd out weeds and retain moisture in sunny areas. Many groundcovers are drought tolerant, but must be watered the first few years until they become established.

One advantage of a turf lawn is how good it feels beneath bare feet. Some groundcovers do tolerate foot traffic –ask for them at your favorite Skagit County nursery. A few short groundcovers (i.e. woolly thyme or creeping thyme) grow beautifully between pavers in sunny areas. Though they are technically not true mosses, Scotch moss and Irish moss can also be walked upon. They need at least partial sun to grow into a thick mat and less water than a “true” moss, which dries up in summer. This natural occurrence causes distress among those who have some true moss in their lawns, which they have mistaken for professional golf courses. The rest of us let our lawns go dormant and celebrate in late summer when we don't have to mow weekly.

### Just Say No To Ivy!

Unfortunately English ivy was once a popular groundcover/lawn alternative. Now people pull out this invasive plant because it likes to climb trees (and smother them); birds eat the seeds, then deposit them, wrapped in fertilizer, to invade other areas; and rats like making nests under the thick mats of vines and leaves. It is a “Noxious Weed” in Washington State — why plant something noxious in your yard? Plants indigenous to the Northwest are often much better behaved. As the name implies, English Ivy is not a local. Natives require less water and no pampering, as they are well adapted to our soils and climate.

### Choose the Right Plant

Do you want a groundcover for an area that is shady or sunny? On a steep slope or flat ground? Boggy or dry? Do you want flowers? Consider these suggestions for various conditions.

- **Kinnikinnick:** Full sun to light shade, well drained soil. It is shrubby, 6 - 8 inches; ideal for slopes or rockeries; evergreen.
- **Wild ginger:** Shade, moist soil, 4 - 8 inches. Heart-shaped solid green leaves, tiny reddish flowers.

- **Bunchberry:** Part shade, moist soil, 4 - 8 inches, white dogwood-like flowers in spring, red berries in late summer. It is deciduous; slow spreading.
- **Native strawberry:** Full to partial sun, well-drained soil, to 5 inches. It has pink blossoms mid-late spring; spreads through stolons. Sometimes produces tiny, edible fruit.
- **Star-flowered false Solomon's Seal:** Shade to part shade, moist soil, 12 - 24 inches. Small white flowers, red berries. Deciduous.
- **Pacific bleeding heart:** Part shade, heart shaped red and white flowers, lacy foliage. 1 - 2 feet, dies back in winter.
- **Maidenhair fern:** Full to part shade, moist soil, 1 - 2 feet. It dies back in winter.
- **Oak fern, sword fern, deer fern, and lady fern** all grow in sun or shade, 2 - 4 feet.



**Photo Left:** Rock rose Henfield Brilliant, covered with vivid blooms, flourishes beneath a taller variegated Weigela shrub. Spreading shrubs like these are eye-catching groundcovers. **Photo Top Right:** Some groundcovers can handle light foot traffic, and grow well between stepping stones. Since the bright green Scotch Moss (at left) is not really a moss, it grows well in full or part sun. Leptinella Platt's Black Brass Buttons (at right) is a fern-like, spreading groundcover. **Photo Bottom Right:** A variety of groundcovers can replace a lawn or compliment other plants in the garden. Everett Chu, owner of Azusa Farm and Gardens west of Mount Vernon, smiles at three favorites: Ceanothus "Diamond Heights" on the right, Fragaria "Lipstick Strawberry" in the center, and the Northwest native Fragaria "Beach Strawberry." **Photos by Valerie Rose / Skagit County Master Gardeners**

## Not Ready to Give Up the Lawn?

If you have children and/or dogs playing outside, you play croquet or badminton, or you really need to practice that putt, keep at least a section of lawn and follow these tips:

1. Grasscycle: Leave yard clippings on the grass to help fertilize the lawn. Grasscycling can provide almost ¼ of your lawn's fertilizer needs.
2. Fertilize moderately in September and May with natural organic or slow release fertilizers or compost. Avoid using "Weed and Feed" products. (see InfoBox)

3. Water your lawn deeply but less often to grow hardy, deep roots. Water about one inch each week, in the morning or evening to minimize evaporation.
4. Improve lawns with aeration, overseeding, or compost.
5. Protect your kids and animals by using bug and weed killers sparingly, if at all. Lawn chemicals can be tracked into your house or rubbed off onto toys and skin.

Instead of treating the whole lawn with herbicides, pull or spot-spray the worst weeds. My favorite weeding tool is called a Grandpa's Weeder: metal pinchers grab the top of the weed's roots, and the long handle lets you pry up the weed, roots and all. Don't fret about the clover. It stays green all year, and adds nitrogen to the soil at a slow rate. If you follow these suggestions, your lawn will be healthy and environmentally green.

### **Why Avoid Weed & Feed?**

- 1) Weed and feed and turf building products are overkill. Many professional landscapers don't use them because it wastes money to spread chemicals where they aren't needed, especially if the goal is to kill a few dandelions. Even if you don't live near water, chemicals from your yard can travel through storm drains to streams, lakes, or Puget Sound. Quick-release fertilizers in most weed and feed products include a big dose of nutrients that increase algae growth in lakes, using up oxygen needed by fish, and causing smelly summer beaches.
- 2) Many chemicals in weed & feed products also kill earthworms and other beneficial organisms. These soil-dwelling creatures are essential for healthy soil that can grow a healthy lawn.
- 3) Half of the 98 pesticide and health studies reviewed by the American College of Toxicology found a higher cancer risk and other health problems in families that use yard and garden pesticides. For children, pesticide effects may last a lifetime. Slow release, organic fertilizers have staying power without the toxic side effects.

(From the King Co. Natural Lawn and Garden Care Hotline:  
[www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/yard/lawn/](http://www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/yard/lawn/) )

### **Resources:**

- Groundcovers for Western Washington, WSU King County Extension:  
<http://king.wsu.edu/gardening/documents/77GroundcoversforWesternWashington.pdf>
- Northwest Natural Yard and Garden, King County:  
[www.kingcounty.gov/environment/stewardship/nw-yard-and-garden.aspx](http://www.kingcounty.gov/environment/stewardship/nw-yard-and-garden.aspx)
- "Honey I Shrunk the Lawn" video, King County:  
[www.kingcounty.gov/environment/stewardship/nw-yard-and-garden/shrunk-lawn.aspx](http://www.kingcounty.gov/environment/stewardship/nw-yard-and-garden/shrunk-lawn.aspx)
- Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest, Arthur Kruckerberg, University of Washington Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2003