

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

HEAD:

Living Outdoor Carpets that Don't Need Water

BODY:

Many gardeners are introducing drought-tolerant plants into their yards to save on summer watering. If you are moving in this direction, you may already have selected trees, shrubs, and perennials that do well with minimal water through our dry summer months.

You may also be using mulch on exposed soil between plants to discourage weeds and retain moisture. There are organic mulches such as compost and bark, and inorganic mulches such as gravel. Then there are living mulches: low-growing, mat-forming plants that crowd out weeds and shade the soil.

Great Plant Picks is an organization that recommends plants especially for the Pacific Northwest. Here are some of their suggestions for groundcovers to try in a drought-tolerant garden. Remember that even drought-tolerant plants require regular water for the first couple of years until their root systems are well established.

The hardy geranium 'Mavis Simpson' (*Geranium x riversleaianum* 'Mavis Simpson') prefers full sun but tolerates some shade. It grows 18 to 24 inches tall and 36 to 48 inches wide in average, well-drained soil, and displays large, pink flowers from May to September. It doesn't self-seed but it does spread; cut it back if it threatens other plants.

Brass Buttons (*Leptinella squalida* 'Platt's Black') will grow in full sun or part shade. It looks like a tiny feathery fern with gray, purple, and black tints. It creeps through paving cracks and crevices and can also be used as a low-traffic lawn. It's not choosy about soil. It has tiny yellow buttonlike flowers in spring and summer.

Georgia Blue Speedwell (*Veronica peduncularis* 'Georgia Blue') is easy to grow in any soil in sun or part shade. It grows 6 to 8 inches tall and produces blue flowers from April to early June. If it spreads too much, prune it back.

Cascade Oregon Grape (*Mahonia nervosa*) is an evergreen native shrub that will grow in full sun or dark shade, but in sun it will grow densely enough to smother weeds. It has glossy, green leaves with yellow flowers in May, followed by blue berries in fall. It grows 2 feet tall and 4 feet wide, and spreads by suckers.

European Wild Ginger (*Asarum europaeum*) likes shade and humus-rich soil. Its evergreen, glossy, kidney-shaped leaves make an attractive carpet for a woodland floor. Its underground stems smell of ginger.

Barrenwort or bishop's hat (*Epimedium x perralchicum*) grows to 15 inches tall and spreads 6 to 12 inches a year. It has yellow flowers in later winter and early spring, and attractive evergreen foliage. It tolerates poor soil, is drought tolerant in part or full shade, and slugs don't much like it.

Miniature London Pride (*Saxifraga* 'Primuloides') is a good choice for deep shade. It will form an evergreen mat 12 inches by 12 inches. In bright shade, it will produce airy flower spikes. It spreads slowly by stolons.

Visit www.greatplantpicks.org to see pictures and find out more about the growing habits and maintenance of these plants.



PHOTO CAPTION (Filename: Groundcovers01_photo by Jason Miller):

A wide variety of groundcovers can be viewed at the WSU Discovery Garden at 16602 State Route 536 in west Mount Vernon. Photo by Jason Miller.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.