

Ground Cover Plants Offer Many Benefits

By Marlene Finley
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Consider ground cover plants for your garden

The ground cover plants that catch many an eye this time of year are those with berries, but ground cover plants offer many more benefits than eye candy.

A ground cover, literally, is something that covers and protects the soil. While this may include bark, arborist chips and traditional lawns, there are many reasons to choose from a wide variety of low-growing plants that are easy to maintain, beautiful and environmentally friendly.

“Living mulch” is the best way to describe ground cover plants that creep along the surface, such as the native kinnikinnik or common bearberry (*Actostaphylos uva-ursi*). These carpets of sprawling plants can diffuse heavy rain before it hits the soil, preventing erosion and flooding. They retain soil moisture, provide shade for soil in summer and limit weed germination. Once established, kinnikinnik thrives in full sun with little moisture. It can serve as a replacement for lawn in parking strips and on steep, hard to mow slopes. With long, trailing branches, dark green leaves, and white or pink urn-shaped flowers, in spring, this plant is a garden super star. And scoring extra points, kinnikinnik produces a late season fruit, or berry, that attracts and nourishes birds and other wildlife.

Many native ground cover plants are excellent food sources for native birds and beneficial insects. The berries of many of our native plants are produced in fall and winter, just when wild birds need them most. Native birds thrive on the very specific nutrients present in native plants. Creeping or trailing snowberry (*Symphoricarpus mollis*) grows only 1-½ feet or less in height. The showy white berries are a staple diet for a large variety of native birds including wrens, warblers, nuthatches, waxwings, wood warblers, vireos, thrushes, woodpeckers, chickadees, woodpeckers and more. While the berries are nutritious for birds and wildlife, they are considered poisonous to humans with names such as “corpse berry.”

Another berry-producing ground cover is salal (*Gaultheria shallon*). Salal is a low-growing, woody shrub that grows in full sun to shade and prefers peaty soil. Not only do the berries provide much needed winter food source for birds and occasionally deer, but salal is a native host to beneficial insects, including caterpillars which, according to entomologist and author, Dou Tallamy, offer some of the highest nutrient food sources for young birds (envision a soft bag full of nutrients). The genus *Gaultheria* boasts about 135 species, with many non-native ground covers to consider as well. One showy favorite is wintergreen, or teaberry, displaying glossy green leaves that produce a strong wintergreen scent when crushed. It also produces gorgeous clusters of pink berries.



Native *Juniperus communis* growing Deception Pass State Park. Photo by Marlene Finley / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

On steep slopes the fibrous roots of creeping ground cover plants hold soils in place and require little water once established. The Point Reyes *Ceanothus* (*Ceanothus gloriosus*) is one such ground cover that creeps horizontally across the ground. Native to coastal California, it also does well in our climate. You may be more familiar with *Ceanothus* as a shrub or small tree (common name California lilac, deer brush or buck brush). Spring flowers attract pollinators including bees and butterflies and serve as hosts for caterpillars. Deer tend to avoid eating this plant, but rabbits have been known to snack on tender new growth of the Point Reyes *Ceanothus*.

Continuing in the category of native ground cover plants (*Juniperus communis*) can be found in a dwarf form that sprawls horizontally and grows less than 2 feet high. This juniper is green to blue green in color with compact needles. Juniper berries are actually seed cones since junipers are gymnosperms. A similar, although non-native species available in local nurseries is one called shore juniper (*Juniperus conferta*) native to Japan.

Ground cover plants that cascade over retaining walls can be a beautiful garden feature. Native to China, the Himalayas and northern India, *Cotoneaster* offers several species of ground covers that thrive in our area. Bearberry *Cotoneaster* (*Cotoneaster dammeri*) is a popular choice, sporting abundant red berries throughout the winter. As this low-growing *Cotoneaster* spreads

horizontally, its branches root along the ground. Often vigorous, it can spread ten feet or more so make sure to provide space between plants. *Cotoneaster dammeri* makes a very good ground cover in sun and partial shade and will often drape over rock walls and cascade down slopes. Some varieties maintain a deep green color through the winter, while others may display green, orange and rust colored leaves.

Consider the benefits ground cover plants provide to deter weeds. Healthy ground cover plants can prevent the germination of weed seeds and in some cases, out compete weeds, making these low growing plants a great alternative to beauty bark.

Even low maintenance plants need occasional care. Some plants may need light pruning or shearing to keep them looking their best. And even plants that typically thrive on dry sites may need irrigation at times, especially during the first one-to-two years after planting.

From beautiful foliage and berries to stabilizing slopes and feeding our native wildlife, consider ground cover plants part of your garden palette. You won't be sorry!



Creeping cotoneaster is valued for its tiny white flowers, excellent glossy foliage and attractive red berries. *Photo by Marlene Finley / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

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