

Groundcovers Go Native!

As we know, native plants are often the best choice for our Northwest gardens because they are well adapted to our native soils and climate. We can use native plants for a variety of purposes, including beautiful groundcovers as underplantings for trees, shrubs, and perennials, or even as lawn substitutes! Groundcovers tend to grow horizontally, filling in as a solid mass by spreading below ground by rhizomes, or above ground by stolons. Some are evergreen, some deciduous, and most are perennial, providing lasting beauty year after year. Advantages of groundcovers include crowding out weeds and moisture retention in sunny areas that dry out quickly.

Now that you are convinced you need a native groundcover, it just remains to pick one that is suitable for your location. The first consideration as always for any plant choice is the climate condition at your site. Shade, sun, soil – the three biggies! Then, how tall do you want the ground cover to be? If it is to provide underplanting for trees, it can be taller than under perennials or shrubs. Do you need an evergreen cover, or deciduous? Do you want flowers? The following are some suggestions for various conditions, and some references for you to explore to find even more.

Low growing groundcovers

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi (kinnikinnick): Full sun to light shade, well drained moist to dry soil. Native to rocky, sandy soils. Shrubby, with spreading woody stems 6–8 inches in height. Evergreen, a variety of cultivars available at nurseries.

Asarum caudatum (wild ginger): Shade, moist soil, 4–8 inches in height. Heart-shaped solid green leaves, inconspicuous small reddish flowers hide under the leaves.

Cornus canadensis (bunchberry): Part shade, moist soil, 4–8 inches in height, has white dogwood-like flowers in spring, red berries in late summer. Deciduous, slow spreading.



Additional low growers to investigate are the native strawberries, *Fragaria* spp and the native stonecrop, *Sedum* spp. Both genus have several species that do well in a variety of habitats. The various *Viola* spp (yellow wood violet and early blue violet) are also great early bloomers that will spread.

Medium growing groundcovers

Maianthemum dilatatum (false lily of the valley): Shade to part shade, moist soil. Dense lily-like foliage up to 14 inches tall, has white flowers in racemes in early summer followed by red berries. Deciduous. Can be an aggressive spreader.

Oxalis oregano (Sourgrass/ Redwood sorrel): Shade to part shade, moist soil, 12–18 inches. Clover-like foliage with white to pink flowers in spring. Deciduous. Can be aggressive.

Smilacina stellata (*Maianthemum stellata*) (star-flowered false Solomon's Seal): Shade to part shade, moist soil, 12-24 inches. Lanceolate leaves with racemes of small white flowers that produce red berries. Deciduous.

Other medium growers include *Tellima grandiflora*, fringe cup and *Tiarella* sp. foam flower, and *Vancouveria hexandra*, inside-out flower.

Tall Groundcovers

Juniperus communis (common juniper): Full sun, dry soil, up to 3 feet tall. Spreading, prostrate shrubby evergreen conifer sharp needles. Round, berry-like cones on female plants are covered with a waxy bloom that turns blue-black when ripe.

Adiantum aleuticum (maidenhair fern): Full to part shade, moist soil, grows 1 to 2 feet. Delicate perennial fern with wiry black stems. Dies back in winter.

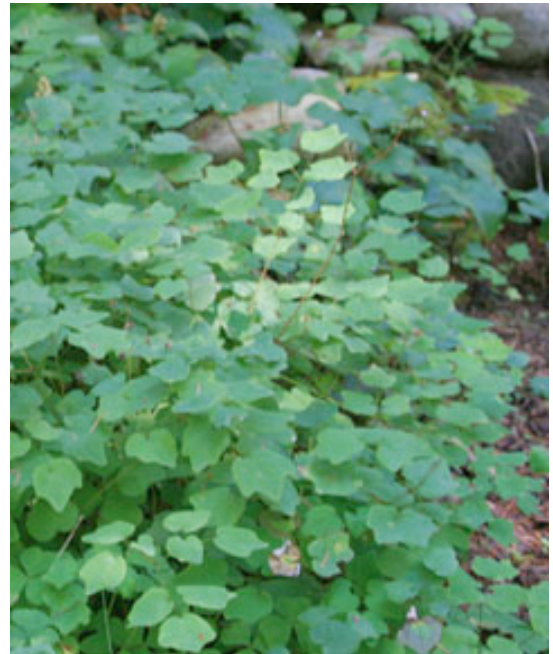
Other useful ferns include oak fern (*Gymnocarpum dryopteris*), sword fern (*Polystichum munitum*), deer fern (*Blechnum spicant*), and lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*). All grow in sun or shade and reach 2–4 feet in height.

Dicentra Formosa (Pacific bleeding heart): Part shade, beautiful heart shaped red and white flowers and lacy foliage, 1-2 feet, dies back in winter.

Hopefully these ideas will give you a place to start in your search for the perfect groundcover for your location!

References

Amitage's Native Plants for North American Gardens, by Allan M. Armitage, Timber Press Inc, 2006



Encyclopedea of Northwest Native Plants for Gardens and Landscapes, by Kathleen Robson, Alice Richter and Marianne Filbert, Timber Press Inc, 2008

“Ever Alluring Ferns” by William Cullina, Horticulture Magazine, May 2006

[Plant Native](#). A variety of resources in one online location

[Washington Native Plant Society Index of Native Plants](#)