





# Roll out the green carpet

Dusty periwinkles may have given groundcover a bad name, but, as John Hoyland points out, large plantings of a single species can be both practical and key to a garden's design. The trick is to choose the right plants





**I**T is not only plants that come in and out of fashion; entire approaches to gardening experience the same ebb and flow. Fifty years ago, gardeners would have been at ease discussing groundcover plants and garden publications would have been filled with advice about what plants could best be used en masse to smother weeds, retain moisture or simply cut down on maintenance. Today, the talk is of plant communities, planting matrixes and prairies, never of anything as old-fashioned as groundcover.

The word itself is perhaps part of the problem, evoking images from the 1970s of sterile plantings in supermarket car parks or around municipal buildings, with swathes of periwinkles and dull shrubs. Recently, the term ‘monoplanting’ has been used to describe groundcover, but this is probably not going to catch on with sensible gardeners. Whatever term we use, most gardens have places that would be improved by planting large areas of a single plant and most gardeners would appreciate the lighter workload involved compared, for example, with maintaining a mixed border. The point is not to get fixated on terms and styles that might seem outmoded, but to appreciate that large plantings of a single plant can be both practical and an important element in the design of a garden.

## ‘Most gardens have areas that would be improved by large areas of a single plant’

The most famous authority on groundcover plants was probably Graham Stuart Thomas, who published his book *Plants for Ground Cover* in 1970. A decade earlier, plantswoman Margery Fish had already produced her own book on the subject, *Ground Cover Plants*. She observed that, in their native habitat, many plants form large colonies to create a solid expanse of a single plant. Her thesis was that dense carpets of the same plant, foliage or flower not only protect the soil and reduce weeds, but also create structure and rhythm, providing a calming respite from more exuberant plantings. It is an idea that is as appealing today as it was when she was writing.

The dust jacket of Fish's book promised a garden ‘attractive throughout the year with the minimum amount of effort’. Thomas also stressed that groundcover plants were low-maintenance plants. Level-headed gardeners know to be wary about claims of low-work gardening and, in the case of groundcover plants, the work is in the preparation of the



Preceding pages:

**White flat-headed flowers of *Achillea crithmifolia* (front right) in this Mediterranean gravel garden.**

*Above: **Artemisia pedemontana**. Right: **Tanacetum densum***



soil. Every trace of perennial weeds has to be removed before you can plant.

Once that is done, the choice of plants is wide. Those that increase by stolons, or runners, are usually the fastest spreaders, but they may be too vigorous for some gardens. The creeping dogwood, *Cornus canadensis*, for example, looks attractive from its spring flowers until its autumn foliage, but a single plant can colonise a square yard in a season.

Hardy geraniums are often recommended as groundcover. *Geranium macrorrhizum* has dense foliage that is reliably evergreen, even in harsh winters, but has a short flowering period and looks best when the spent →

*Left: The glossy evergreen leaves of **Asarum europaeum** glow in the darkest corners. Facing page: Evergreen **Epimedium pinnatum** subsp. **colchicum** produces yellow flowers in spring. Here, it has spread itself under a **Malus floribunda***









Left: Delicate deciduous American barrenwort, *Vancouveriana hexandra*. Right: Swathes of *Phlox subulata* 'Alexander's Surprise'

flowers are sheared off. Needing less maintenance are forms of *G. sanguineum*, described by Fish as indefatigable: 'It thickens but does not run, burrow or delve.'

The range of plants is not limited to those that spread across the soil; even clump-forming plants can be grouped together to form groundcover. At Glyndebourne in East Sussex, the glossy leaves of dozens of hellebores cover the ground under a spreading fig tree. The dying leaves are cut back in January to make way for the hellebore flowers and to create space for snowdrops, dwarf iris and the early-flowering *Narcissus* 'February Gold'.

Recently, some imaginative nurserymen and garden designers have been looking afresh at groundcover plants, particularly in the context of finding alternatives to grass lawns. French nurseryman Olivier Filippi writes extensively about groundcover plants in his book *Planting Design for Dry Gardens*. The book's title is misleading: Mr Filippi's work

is a compendium of groundcover plants (or green carpets, as he refers to them). Although the focus is on Mediterranean plants, he points out that most can be grown in the colder, damper climates of northern Europe, as long as the soil is well drained.

## ‘Adventurous gardeners might like to try the soft, dense carpets of *Artemisia pedemontana*’

The palette of plants recommended in the book encompasses familiar plants, such as thymes and oreganos, and unusual species unknown to Fish and Thomas. Adventurous gardeners might like to try the soft, dense

carpets of *Artemisia pedemontana*. It is only a few inches high and, hailing from European mountain ranges up to 4,000ft above sea level, should be hardy in Britain. Another of the author's favourites is *Tanacetum densum*, the aromatic silver foliage of which can be seen spreading around the rock garden in Kew Gardens. Mr Filippi points out that hand weeding around the plant is unnecessary because the species releases chemical substances that inhibit the germination of competing species. Would that many more plants had evolved with this trait.

Fish and Mr Filippi are separated by a lifetime that has seen huge changes in outlook about what makes a garden, but, together, they are an invaluable resource for creating beautiful and vibrant spaces of groundcover, 'mono-planting' or 'green carpeting'. Call it what you will, the results will be the same.  John Hoyland is gardens advisor at Glyndebourne, East Sussex

### Groundcover plants for sunny places

The silver, velvety leaves of *Stachys byzantina* are often seen skirting around rose bushes. If you don't want the 2ft-tall flower spikes, consider growing the non-flowering form, *S. byzantina* 'Silver Carpet', which will also spread more quickly than other cultivars.

Another silver-leaved perennial, *Achillea umbellata*, will retain its foliage during mild winters. The fern-like leaves are topped with 5in-tall stems of white flowers in early summer.

Several other short, spreading achilleas make good groundcover, particularly *A. crithmifolia*. Hardy in even the coldest part of Britain, its finely cut grey-green foliage spreads rapidly and is so tough that in parts of Europe it is used as an alternative to lawns. It is hard to find in nurseries, but is worth searching out.

Thymes have been popular as groundcover since the Victorian era. The best types to use are cultivars of the creeping forms: *Thymus ciliatus*, *T. hirsutus* and the shortest of all, *T. serpyllum*. Well-drained,

poor soil is best and ensuring that the ground is weed free before planting is essential.

### Groundcover plants for shady places

Most epimediums—types of barrenwort—will provide attractive year-round foliage and delicate spring flowers. The most robust and vigorous are forms of *Epimedium x perralchicum* and *E. x versicolour*, with marbled foliage that remains throughout the winter. A more delicate alternative is the deciduous American barrenwort, *Vancouveria hexandra*.

*Asarum europaeum*, referred to as wild ginger because of the scent of its rhizome, is not a flashy plant, but its glossy, heart-shaped leaves shine in even the darkest shade. It is about 6in tall and remains evergreen.

Also about 6in tall, *Phlox subulata* is very different from the more common border phlox. It is happy carpeting the ground under deciduous shrubs and is smothered with fragrant flowers in late spring. It is a bit of a straggly plant; although *P. douglasii* is neater, it is much slower to spread.