Although often overlooked, groundcovers can play an important role in a landscape. Not only do they provide a backdrop against which to showcase larger plants, they also knit together the various elements of a composition. They are useful for weed suppression and erosion control and provide cover for birds and beneficial insects.

Groundcovers can be evergreen or deciduous. Some are suitable for sun, others for shade. Some require regular irrigation, while others prefer drier conditions. Many adapt to a variety of situations. This article introduces several of the many fine candidates for various scenarios, and all are under, or can be easily maintained under, two feet in height.

SOAKING UP THE SUN

Many groundcovers are evergreen so will cover the ground year round. Among these is Mount Vernon laurel (Prunus laurocerasus ‘Mount Vernon’). This variety of English laurel stays under two feet tall, and despite its slow growth rate, it gradually expands to cover an area five feet in diameter, weaving around and complementing larger plantings.

Among the numerous evergreen conifers that make good groundcovers, Siberian cypress (Microbiota decussata) is easy to grow and effective. With sprays of lacy, scale-like foliage that radiate out from the center, it can reach eight feet in diameter while staying under two feet tall.
Many varieties of juniper perform well in sunny sites with well-drained, sandy soil. Some of the loveliest are shore junipers. *Juniperus conferta* ‘Blue Pacific’ is a dwarf selection that reaches one foot tall and spreads to six feet. Native to the sea coast of Japan, it has feathery, blue-green foliage and gray berries.

Though another conifer, *Podocarpus* ‘Blue Gem’, can reach four feet tall, pruning can keep it below the two-foot threshold. This cooperative, blue-needled shrub is both easy and interesting, making it worth the small effort required to keep it at two feet. ‘Blue Gem’ is adaptable to a variety of conditions, including some shade.

Evergreen “creepers” that are content in full sun include ornamental strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*), creeping Taiwan bramble (*Rubus rolfei*), and barren strawberry (*Waldsteinia ternata*). All of these have attractive foliage, flowers and berries. The bramble and ornamental strawberry have white flowers, while those of the barren strawberry are a cheerful yellow. A word of caution: Taiwan bramble is a tenacious groundcover that can spread to 12 feet or more, so make sure you want the coverage it will provide.

Wall germander (*Teucrium chamaedrys*) and sun rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*) are two evergreen groundcovers with shrublike forms that are effective at edging walkways or when massed as hedges. In the mint family (Lamiaceae), wall germander gets only a foot or so tall, and its magenta flowers are attractive to bees. Although evergreen, it tends to look best if cut back in early spring to keep it from getting leggy. Sun rose has a more relaxed habit, enabling it to cascade over a wall. The flowers of its several varieties come in tones of yellow, pink, rose, peach and bright orange. As with wall germander, judicious trimming can keep sun rose dense and compact rather than leggy.

**COOL IN THE SHADE**

*Pachysandra*, a genus of groundcovers often planted in shady areas, became a lot more interesting after plant explorer Dan Hinkley introduced the selection *Pachysandra axillaris* ‘Windcliff Fragrant’ into the market. In full to light shade, this stoloniferous stunner from China has fragrant white flowers in early spring, and then again in autumn. Its blanket of evergreen foliage reaches four-to-six inches tall. Another Hinkley introduction for shade,
**Beesia deltophylla**, is an evergreen clumper with lustrous heart-shaped leaves and wispy spikes of small white flowers in early summer. It’s native to southeastern Tibet.

The six-inch-tall Himalayan maidenhair fern (*Adiantum venustum*) is an evergreen groundcover that slowly colonizes an area of about three feet wide. You will enjoy its emerging bronzy fronds most if you cut off the previous year’s foliage in January. In spring, the foliage turns bright green.

Some small, shade-loving groundcovers can become dense carpets or weave around pavers. Two of these are brass buttons (*Leptinella squalida*) and alpine water fern (*Blechnum penna-marina*). Both of these little gems stay under five inches tall and can take some foot traffic. Brass buttons has green tones of feathery, fern-like foliage. Alpine water fern is a true fern for moist, shady sites. It grows slowly, eventually reaching four feet in diameter, and performs best with moisture-retentive soil and regular summer water.

**GRASSES, VINES, SEDUMS AND HERBS**

Many other plants—including grasses, vines, sedums and herbs—can make excellent groundcovers. Among these are mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*), which has dark-green, grass-like evergreen leaves and produces tiny spikes of lilac flowers. Vines, such as the *Fatshedera* shown in the *Pachysandra* photo, can often do double duty as groundcovers, weaving around shrubs and trees. The very fragrant star jasmine vine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) makes a good groundcover as well.

Creeping sedums and herbs such as thyme and oregano are great for planting below shrubs, between stepping stones, and along walkways. They require sun and will not tolerate wet sites.

**CONCLUSIONS**

When starting a new garden or renovating an existing one, don’t forget to add groundcovers to your list when you visit the nursery. These small wonders can be the finishing touch you need for an inspired composition.

If all this seems overwhelming, seek out a landscape designer for assistance.

*Adapted with permission from the website of the Washington Chapter of the Association of Professional Landscape Designers. Visit www.apldwa.org for more great articles and garden resources, or to contact a designer.*

**Janine Anderson** is a landscape designer and writer based in Port Townsend. See her work at www.northbeachlandscapes.com.
For fans of Pacific Northwest native plants, groundcover options abound. I grow several in my small Ballard garden, including stalwarts such as salal (Gaultheria shallon) and western sword fern (Polystichum munitum), which do nicely in the partial, dry shade of my young Douglas fir.

Mixed in with these are specimens of the wonderfully architectural dwarf Oregon grape, Mahonia nervosa. This mahonia stays low to the ground and offers beautiful, fern-like evergreen foliage, bright-yellow early spring flowers, and large clusters of blue berries. Also planted in this area are lots of star flowers, Lysimachia borealis (syn. Trientalis borealis), which I profiled in the Spring 2014 issue of the “Bulletin.” A small, woodland perennial with creeping rhizomes (underground stems), it produces whorls of lance-shaped leaves on short, vertical stalks. In spring, small, pinkish-white flowers sit atop the foliage and look like diminutive forest “stars.”

For moister areas in my shaded garden, I love the piggy-back plant, Tolmiea menziesii. Another rhizomatous perennial—but evergreen—it produces clumps of heart-shaped leaves with serrated edges. Unusual, brownish-purple, ribbon-like flowers appear on spikes above the foliage in spring. Western bleeding heart (Dicentra formosa) is another favorite, with its ferny foliage and purple, heart-shaped flowers.

In his “Smorgasbord of Natives” article in the Fall 2017 issue of the “Arboretum Bulletin,” estate gardener Daniel Mount recommended several groundcovers, including Oregon wood sorrel (Oxalis oregana). With its “velvety, shamrock-like leaves and cup-shaped lilac flowers,” the fast-spreading rhizomatous plant is great for forming a green carpet under the dry shade of coniferous trees. Visit Rhododendron Glen in the Arboretum to see this beauty in action.

Another recommendation from Daniel for dry shade is false lily-of-the-valley (Maianthemum dilatatum), which he described as “a lovely groundcover with spikes of delicate white spring flowers. The glossy, heart-shaped leaves emerge in early spring and persist into fall. Tough as nails, it spreads where everything else sulks.”

For moist shade, Daniel recommended—among others—Scouler’s corydalis (Corydalis scouleri) for its succulent, ferny foliage and clusters of pink flowers. In sunny spots, he uses Sedum spathulifolium, sea thrift (Armeria maritima), and many more.

You can read Daniel’s article online, as well as all the articles in our “Tried and True” series, at arboretumfoundation.org/news/bulletin-archive/tried-and-true-plants.

—Niall Dunne, “Bulletin” Editor