

**Friday's Feature**

**By**

**Theresa Friday**

April 19, 2009

### **Using ground covers in the landscape**

Ground covers are low-growing plants used to cover an area in the landscape. Typically, they are perennial, evergreen plants with sprawling or spreading habits. They generally are 1 foot or shorter, but taller plants are used occasionally.

In addition to the beauty they provide, ground covers have practical uses. They can guide traffic movement through a site. They lower the ground temperature and reduce glare. Some are effective in erosion control. They are especially useful in problem areas such as steep slopes, under low-branching trees and shrubs, places where large tree roots protrude and confined areas where mowing is difficult.

The most widely planted ground cover in today's landscape is turfgrass. While many people may avoid the use of turf as a ground cover, on the practical side, no other plant can withstand as much foot traffic as turf. Most of the time it succeeds in providing a suitable cover. Sometimes however, unsuitable growing conditions like too much shade, prevents its continued success. Other ground covers may provide solutions to a landscaping challenge or just add a bit of much needed texture and color.

Following are some tips to consider when adding ground covers to your landscape.

- Use low ground covers for a transition between the lawn area and taller plants in the garden bed.
- Select ground covers based upon their ability to add year-round beauty to the landscape. Herbaceous ground covers die back to the ground in the winter, exposing bare soil. If this is not the look you want, choose evergreen ground covers.
- Select ground covers, according to your site's conditions: Sun or shade? Clay soil or sand? Moist or dry? Select ground covers that will survive and thrive under your conditions and not require heroic measures to keep them alive!
- Moss as a ground cover? Sure! While heavy, dense shade is often considered a curse, it is a blessing when it comes to moss. The color and texture of moss can add great interest. And, it's virtually maintenance free.
- Consider the height of the ground cover. Will you choose a six-inch ajuga or a four-foot fern?
- Before planting, always prepare the soil as you would for any other permanent type of planting. Remember, ground covers are capable of giving long lasting beauty and function, but their performance is only as good as the effort one puts into soil preparation.

- Beware of ground covers that state, “Easy, rapid coverage in either sun, shade, wet or dry.” They may be horticultural nightmares due to their aggressive nature. If you need fast coverage, closer planting of better behaved ground covers may be the better answer.
- Ground covers are not the “bottom feeders” of the landscape. They add interest, and bring unity to the garden making them the unsung heroes among the more horticulturally prominent members of the garden.

There are many ground covers to choose from for North Florida growing conditions. Some to consider are ajuga, perennial peanut, cast iron plant, holly fern, autumn fern, English ivy, shore juniper, creeping juniper, liriope, mondo grass and confederate jasmine. For more information on ground covers, visit the Florida-Friendly Landscape website at <http://www.floridayards.org/index.php> or call your local Extension Office.

Generally, ground covers are established in two years, although some require slightly more or less time. During this period, a regular program of irrigation, fertilization and weed control insures strong, rapid growth. Mulch aids water retention in new plantings and helps the spread of ground covers that root along their stems. Once established, many ground covers need only an occasional trimming to keep them tidy and within their designated area.



**Ajuga is a flowering ground cover that performs well in shady areas**

*Photo credit: Theresa Friday*

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information on County Extension Services and other articles of interest go to <http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu>.

###