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Selecting a Ground Cover

This NebGuide describes how to evaluate a site for ground cover and the characteristics of the most common ground cover species grown in Nebraska.

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Ground covers are low-growing plants used in landscaping for mulching or covering the soil. They are typically low growing but may range in height from just inches to over 4 feet tall. Ground covers differ in color, texture and form and can be herbaceous, woody, succulent or grassy. Some have attractive flowers, while others are grown only for their foliage.

Selecting the best species for a site is important to its success as a ground cover. When choosing a ground cover, consider sun and wind exposure, soil type and pH, and the function it will have in the landscape.

Ground covers can provide a smooth transition from shrubs to turfgrass, soften edges of paths and visually tie buildings to the landscape. They are also useful in areas where turf is difficult to grow or maintain, especially under trees and on steep slopes. Although ground covers can adapt to many sites, they will not solve all maintenance problems and they do require some maintenance of their own. Matching site and plant requirements is the first step in achieving a low maintenance situation.

For more information on preparing soil, planting and maintaining ground covers, request NebGuide G84-697, *Ground Covers - Their Establishment and Maintenance*, from your local Cooperative Extension office.

Height, spread, flower color, leaf color, light requirements, and drought tolerance are important characteristics to know when choosing a ground cover. The site requirements and characteristics of several commonly grown ground covers in Nebraska are listed in *Table I*.

Table I. Ground covers for Nebraska plantings.

<i>Common name</i>	<i>Scientific name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Height</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Summer foliage color</i>	<i>Flower color</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Alpine rock cress	<i>Arabis alpina</i>	full sun	5-16"	12"	soft gray-green	White; fragrant; very prolific	Drought tolerant; for rock gardens or borders on limited scale.
Barren	<i>Waldsteinia</i>	sun, shade	4-10"	12"	deep,	yellow	Keep well watered,

strawberry	<i>fragarioides</i>				shiny green		does not tolerate drought or long periods of heat.
Bearberry	<i>Arctostaphylos uvaursi</i>	sun to light shade	1-4"	12-24"	dark green; leathery	whitish pink	Survives on rugged conditions such as sand or gravel.
Border jewel	<i>Polygonum affine</i>	full sun; well-drained soil	12-18"	18"	dark green	pink, white	Needs good fertility.
Candytuft	<i>Iberis sempervirens</i>	sun, light shade; well-drained soil	6-12"	12-15"	dark green	white	Dense mat of growth requiring regular watering; cut back blossoms.
Climbing Hydrangea	<i>Hydrangea anomala</i> subsp. <i>Petiolaris</i>	light to moderate shade	6-12"	12"	dark green	white; fragrant	Most often found as a climber.
Cotoneaster, cranberry	<i>Cotoneaster apiculatus</i>	sun; light shade; dry soil	12-24"	5-8"	dark green; dark red in fall	pink; tiny	Excellent wildlife attractant; can be planted on steep slopes.
Cotoneaster, rock spray	<i>Cotoneaster horizontalis</i>	sun; light, dry soil	24-30"	5-8"	red-green	pink, tiny	See Cotoneaster, cranberry comments.
Cottage Pinks	<i>Dianthus plumarius</i>	sun; well-drained soil	12-18"	8-12"	gray-green	rose, purple, white; fragrant	Mow after flowering to maintain compact, even growth; mulch to maintain uniform soil moisture and reduce heat stress.
Creeping bugleweed	<i>Ajuga reptans</i>	shade, accepts full sun	3-4"	6-12"	glossy green	bluish violet; fragrant	Best foliage in shade; water moderately; provide winter protection.
Creeping speedwell	<i>Veronica repens</i>	sun, light shade; moist or dry soil	4"	12-15"	shiny, dark green	light blue	Leaves are prone to fertilizer damage.
Crested iris	<i>Iris cristata</i>	sun, half shade; prefers well drained, cool moist soil	6"	12"	green	pale lilac	Creeping rhizomes should not be covered by soil.
Crown vetch	<i>Coronilla varia</i>	sun, tolerates shade	12-24"	24"	emerald green	pink, white	Used for rough, large areas, erosion control drought resistant, can be invasive; mow in

							spring.
Daylily	<i>Heemerocallis</i> sps.	sun, half shade	24"	12-36"	light green to grayish green	several colors	Tough, pest-free plan
Dead Nettle	<i>Lamium maculatum</i>	sun, shade; well-drained soil	6-8"	12-16"	Silver leaves with narrow green edges	lavendar, pink, white	Must be planted in cool sites.
English Ivy	<i>Hedera helix</i> 'Baltica'	partial shade; moist soil	6-8"	12"	lustrous dark green; whitish cream veins	White	Ideal for northern exposures where evergreen desired. Relatively pest free; avoid planting sites exposed to continuous winter sun.
Goldentuft alyssum, basket-of-gold	<i>Aurinia saxatilis</i> 'Compacta'	full sun; well-drained soil	6-10"	12-18"	grayish green	yellow	Cut back after flowering to stimulate compact growth.
Hall's Japanese honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera japonica</i> 'Halliana'	full sun; light shade	12-24"	36"	green	white to yellow; fragrant	Twining vine covers quickly, can be used on slopes, may be too aggressive for small site. Cut back to maintain attractive growth.
Hardy Begonia	<i>Begonia grandis</i>	well-drained soil	8-24"	12-24"	dark green with red veins	pinkish white; fragrant	Shelter from winds.
Hen-and-chickens	<i>Sempervivum tectorum</i>	full sun or half shade; good drainage	1-3"	6"	green with pinkish purple edges; succulent	purplish red	Easy to grow, drought tolerant.
Japanese fleecflower, dwarf	<i>Fallopia japonica</i> 'Compacta'	full sun; light shade; well-drained soil	12-18"	18"	dark green to pinkish	reddish white	Strong grower, may be invasive; brilliant foliage in fall; drought tolerant; formerly known as <i>Polygonum cuspidatum</i> .
Japanese spurge	<i>Pachysandra terminalis</i> 'Green Carpet'	shade, partial shade; well-	6-12"	12-24"	green	white; fragrant	Annual pruning and fertilizing before growth starts helps maintain

		drained soil					attractiveness; winter mulch.
Juniper, creeping	<i>Juniperus horizontalis</i> 'Blue Rug' 'Blue Harbor'	full sun; hot, dry soil	1' 1'	6-8' 6-8'	grayish blue-green	not ornamental	Turns purple in winter
Lady's Mantle	<i>Alchemilla mollis</i>	moderate shade; well-drained soil	8-15"	12-15"	gray-green; hairy green	yellowish	Flowers are used in dried arrangements.
Lamb's-ears	<i>Stachys byzantina</i>	sun, light shade; well-drained soil	12-18"	12-18"	silvery-gray; velvety soft	pink to purple	Divide every 3-4 years; cut back winter injured foliage.
Leadwort	<i>Ceratostigma plumbaginoides</i>	sun, shade; well-drained soil	6-10"	12-18"	dark green	blue	Cut back after spring flowering; mulch lightly in winter.
Lily-of-the-valley	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	full or partial shade; wet or dry soil	6-8"	12-15"	green	white; fragrant	Useful under trees and shrubs; fertilize annually to maintain vigor; foliage fades by late summer, early fall.
Moss Pink	<i>Phlox subulata</i>	sun; moist	4-6"	12"	needle-shaped, green, very fine	white, pink, blue	Flowers cover the plant in spring.
Periwinkle, myrtle	<i>Vinca minor</i>	sun; light shade; moist or dry soil	3-6"	4-6"	dark green	purple, blue, white	Purple, blue and white flowered cultivars available; water frequently during drought to maintain growth.
Plantain lily	<i>Hosta</i> sps.	shade, half shade; moist soil	12-24"	24-30"	several shades; some with white or yellow margins	white	Foliage dies back each fall.
Purple Poppymallow	<i>Callirhoe involucrate</i>	sun, light shade	18"	12"	dark green	rose-purple	Drought tolerant.
Ribbon grass	<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i> 'Picta'	tolerates any site	24-36"	12-18"	several shades; stripes	not showy	Tolerates poor growing conditions; leaf variegation may disappear on rich,

							well-drained soil.
Sedum, stonecrop	<i>Sedum</i> sps.	full sun	3-12"	12-18"	varies	red, yellow	Wide variation in form; can withstand drought; good winter form.
Snow-in-summer	<i>Cerastium tomentosum</i>	full sun; well-drained soil	6-12"	12-24"	light gray	white	Good on sunny steep slopes.
Spring cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla tabernaemontani</i>	sun, partial shade; well-drained soil	3-6"	12"	rich green	yellow	Mow after flowering to promote compactness.
Sun rose	<i>Helianthemum nummularium</i>	full sun; sandy, well-drained, dry soil	24"	24"	silvery-green	pink, rose	Cut back after first flowering evergreen for early fall rebloom mulch in winter.
Sweet Autumn Clematis	<i>Clematis maximowicziana</i>	sun to light shade; well-drained soil	8-14"	24"	green	white; highly fragrant	Spreads quickly; tendrils cling to any support structures.
Threadleaf coreopsis	<i>Coreopsis verticillata</i>	sun, light shade	15-18"	18-24"	green, very narrow	yellow	Tolerates drought and sandy soils.
Variegated bishop's weed	<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i> 'Variegatum'	sun, shade; tolerates drought and low fertility	6-14"	12-18"	green; cream edges	white; not showy	Spreads vigorously.
Virginia creeper	<i>Parthenocissus quinquefolia</i>	light to moderate shade	3-8"	24"	blue-green; scarlet in early fall	greenish white; not ornamental	Coarse textured, spreads quickly.
Wild ginger	<i>Asarum canadense</i>	shade; moist, rich soil	4-6"	7-10"	dull, gray-green	purplish to reddish-brown	Native woodland plant best grown on sites protected from wind and sun.
Wintercreeper	<i>Euonymus fortunei</i> 'Coloratus'	sun, shade; good or poor soil	24"	24"	purplish fall and winter color; dark green	green; not ornamental	Many cultivars available; drought resistant; insect scale is serious problem.
Woodland strawberry	<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	sun; shade; moist soil	6-9"	12"	dark green	white	Ornamental berries for wildlife food; regular

							watering required; mulch in winter.
Woolly yarrow	<i>Achillea</i> sps.	full sun; dry, sandy soil	6-18"	6-12"	feathery, gray- green	yellow, red, white	Periodic cutting maintains bloom.
Wormwood	<i>Artemisia</i> sps.	best in full sun, accepts partial shade	8-12"	12- 24"	fern-like foliage, silvery gray; silky	not showy	Drought tolerant, best used as accent plant or massed as border.
Yellow Archangel	<i>Lamium galeobdolon</i>	shade	12"	18"	medium green	yellow	Good for sloped areas

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