

Groundcovers – What, Where And When?

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Fifty years ago the word ‘groundcover’ was abuzz in the gardening press and in gardening conversations. I think the idea was about stopping weeds or, maybe, it was only about less gardening. Anyway, the concept hasn’t quite gone away and I believe there are circumstances where the employment of groundcovers is appropriate and justified.

It’s not just about less work. Groundcover under trees and shrubs protects the roots of the canopy, might stabilize a bank, provide furnishing for what would otherwise be bald areas under trees and even add colour and textures in a garden setting.

Lawns are never thought of as groundcovers but they are very efficient at their job *reducing*, yes, *reducing* the amount of work that has to be done and as an added benefit, you can lie on them. Ivy’s pretty efficient too. You can even mow it and trim the edges and it’ll grow and carpet the ground under trees but I’d put a blanket between my body and the ivy. *Vinca major* works but it’s messy - full of loops, leaps and bounds. *Vinca minor* is astonishingly neat - no mowing needed, maybe occasionally you need to remove an ash sapling or a blackberry seedling.

Whatever plant is selected it must be tough - once planted you should be able to walk away - no watering, no divisions, no fertilizer etc. So, a Wisley groundcover book from 1985 has geums as a cover picture. My experience is that geums need regular division to survive and certainly leave gaps for weeds. Another recent book on groundcovers includes sedums and mosses - the concept of groundcovers wildly misapplied. Nothing needs more maintenance than low growing plants which would need constant weeding, would suffer when trodden or lain on. Where could you even stand to weed? And what about the recommendation of lily-of-the-valley as a groundcover for shade? Unlike grass, ivy and periwinkle it’s herbaceous and would leave a mud prairie in the winter.