



GREEN SPRING GARDENS

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NATIVE GROUNDCOVERS FOR THE WASHINGTON, D.C. AREA

Groundcovers are relatively low-growing plants that spread out and hold the soil, or they are planted in large numbers. Turfgrasses are the most common groundcover in sunny areas, but ornamental grasses, other herbaceous plants, and low-growing woody plants are also used. Groundcovers are used:

- as a lawn substitute in areas too shady to support turfgrass, such as under trees and next to buildings
- as an underplanting with trees and shrubs to lower weeding requirements and to reduce the possibility of mower damage to the base of trees

The following are useful definitions:

- Cultivar (cv.) – a cultivated variety designated by single quotes, such as ‘Henry’s Garnet’. A **variety (var.)** - or **subspecies (subsp.)**, in contrast, is found in nature and is a subdivision of a species.
- Full Sun - 6 hours or more of sunlight daily.
- Naturalistic use – native plants that, when properly sited, perform well with minimal care; best used in an informal design that suggests a natural landscape, or for the restoration of native plant communities.
- Part Shade – the amount of light in an area shaded part of the day, among deciduous trees with high branches, among deciduous trees with foliage that is not heavy, or among thinned deciduous woods.
- Full Shade – the amount of light under a dense deciduous tree canopy or beneath evergreens. Few plants grow well under such conditions.

The use of groundcovers can be inspired by nature. Grasslands are natural communities dominated by native perennial grasses and sedges. Wildflowers and woody plants are also found in these communities. Enthusiasts of naturalistic design and wildlife may want to develop **meadow gardens or meadows**. Meadow gardens and meadows are designed versions of grasslands in the moist climate of the eastern United States. For more information about ornamental native grasses and meadows see *Native Ornamental Grasses and Sedges For The Washington D.C. Area* on the Green Spring website and in the library at the Horticulture Center.

The following is a list of native groundcovers that perform well in the Washington, D.C. area. Most plants are herbaceous (woody plants are noted). Most of these plants prefer a moist, well-drained site and cannot be walked on like turfgrass. Light requirements and cultural requirements or tolerances are noted in the comments column. Groundcovers tend to be vigorous so they can crowd out choice, less vigorous plants.

All listed species are native to Virginia, with the exception of log fern. Help conserve native plant populations by buying only propagated plants: never buy plants collected from the wild. Native plants are sold in the Garden Gate Plant Shop at Green Spring during the growing season, the Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society sells plants at Green Spring on Garden Day in May and September, and other native plant vendors sell at Garden Day as well. Earth Sanga, Parkfairfax (in Alexandria), and the U.S. National Arboretum also have native plant sales at garden events.

Many non-native plants that have been planted as groundcovers are a serious threat to natural areas and native plant communities. Invasives should not be grown in gardens and should be removed whenever possible. The *Virginia Invasive Plant Species List* is available from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (<http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/invspdflist>).

NATIVE DECIDUOUS TO SEMI-EVERGREEN GROUNDCOVERS

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Amsonia tabernaemontana</i> (‘Montana’ is low growing - would be more expensive to purchase in large numbers)	Eastern Blue Star, Amsonia	Full sun to light shade
<i>Asarum canadense</i>	Wild Ginger	Part shade to full shade in consistently moist sites; light reseeding & spreads slowly. Usually a small scale groundcover.
<i>Aster</i> – see under <i>Eurybia</i> & <i>Symphotrichum</i>		
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>	River Oats	Full sun to part shade; reseeds heavily in moist sites so best for naturalistic use
<i>Chelone obliqua</i>	Pink Turtlehead	Full sun to light shade in reliably moist to wet sites; small scale groundcover
<i>Dennstaedtia punctilobula</i>	Hay-Scented Fern	Light shade to part shade; tolerates relatively dry sites; best for naturalistic use – spreading habit
<i>Diervilla lonicera</i> (a low growing shrub)	Diervilla, Northern Bush Honeysuckle	Full sun to light shade; tolerates dry sites; naturalistic use.
<i>Eurybia divaricata</i> (<i>Aster divaricatus</i>)	White Wood Aster	Light shade to full shade; reseeds readily – best for naturalistic use; tolerates dry sites
<i>Helianthus divaricatus</i>	Spreading Sunflower, Woodland Sunflower	Full sun to light shade (not as dense in part shade or even dies off); tolerates dry sites; good for naturalistic use
<i>Itea virginica</i> (a low growing shrub) ‘Henry’s Garnet’, ‘Longspire’, ‘Sarah Eve’, & ‘Saturnalia’ are taller & more vigorous. Little Henry (‘Sprich’) is shorter but not nearly as tough.	Virginia Sweetspire	Full sun to part shade; tolerates wet & dry sites Of the tall types ‘Henry’s Garnet’ has the best fall color.
<i>Muhlenbergia capillaris</i>	Pink Muhly, Pink Muhly Grass, Hair-Awn Grass	Full sun. Some forms bloom better than others, so keep the best forms
<i>Osmunda cinnamomea</i> (<i>Osmundastrum cinnamomeum</i> is the name in the <i>Flora of Virginia</i> & some botanists prefer this name)	Cinnamon Fern	Light shade to part shade; constantly moist or wet sites; best for naturalistic use
<i>Packera aurea</i> (<i>Senecio aureus</i>)	Golden Ragwort	Full sun to part shade; moist to wet sites; reseeds readily – good for naturalistic use; semi-evergreen

<p><i>Panicum virgatum</i> The best cultivars for using in larger groups include: 'Heavy Metal' - vertical accent with blue foliage; great for smaller gardens</p> <p>'Northwind' - taller vertical accent than the above & green foliage</p> <p>Ruby Ribbons ('RR1') – some foliage is purplish</p> <p>Newer cultivars are being tested such as 'Apache Rose' & 'Cheyenne Sky'.</p>	Switchgrass	<p>Full sun; soil adaptable & most forms are tolerant of dry sites. Lowland forms are tolerant of wet sites (upland & lowland ecotypes are found in nature).</p> <p>Had to remove 'Northwind' plants & seedlings in a meadow garden with good soil because seedlings outcompeted little bluestem (<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>).</p> <p>'Shenandoah' had low vigor in dry to average sites over time & eventually died out in various locations in our area.</p>
<i>Pycnanthemum muticum</i>	Mountain Mint	Full sun to light shade; tolerates dry sites; can spread rapidly in moist sites
<i>Rhus aromatica</i> 'Gro-low' (a low growing shrub)	Gro-Low Sumac	Full sun; tolerates dry sites
<i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i> ('Goldsturm' is the most common selection but others are available)	Orange Coneflower	Full sun to light shade; prefers moist sites but will survive in drier sites; can be an aggressive spreader in moist sites; some reseeding (pops up where didn't plant it)
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i> An excellent blue-foliaged cultivar in our region is 'Standing Ovation'. Blue Heaven ('MinnBlueA') has performed well in Minnesota & testing in our region.	Little Bluestem	<p>Full sun; very drought tolerant; some reseeding in gardens.</p> <p>The species type is beautiful (green foliage until autumn).</p>
<i>Symphotrichum cordifolium</i> (<i>Aster cordifolius</i>)	Heart-leaved Aster	Light shade to full shade; tolerates dry sites; reseeds readily but better behaved than white wood aster (<i>Eurybia divaricata</i>)
<i>Thelypteris noveboracensis</i>	New York Fern	Light shade to full shade in moist sites; naturalistic use – spreading habit
<i>Viola pubescens</i> (other species can be groundcovers as well, including the common blue violet or <i>V. sororia</i> – this species just seeds into areas on its own)	Yellow Violet	Light shade to part shade; some reseeding; tolerant of poor drainage; naturalistic use
<i>Xanthorrhiza simplicissima</i> (a short woody plant)	Yellowroot	Light shade to part shade; adaptable to dry, moist, or occasionally flooded sites. Love by deer.

Native Evergreen Ferns That Can Be Planted In Mass in Shady Areas

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Dryopteris australis</i> (natural hybrid of <i>D. celsa</i> & <i>D. ludoviciana</i>) – not in the <i>Flora of Virginia</i> but the USDA Plants Database lists in one county in Virginia.	Wood Fern	Light shade to full shade; reliably moist to wet sites
<i>D. ludoviciana</i> (native to NC & other southeastern states - one of the parents of <i>D. australis</i> above)	Log Fern	
<i>Polystichum acrostichoides</i>	Christmas Fern	Light shade to full shade; tolerates dry sites but prefers moist sites

Scientific Names Of Plants - Current Names Are From:

- **Encyclopedia of Life** (<http://eol.org/>) – institutional partners include Harvard University, the Missouri Botanical Garden, the Smithsonian Institution, and The Field Museum.
- **Tropicos** from the Missouri Botanical Garden (<http://tropicos.org/>)

If a second scientific name is given, it is usually an old name that is still seen in some references or used by some nurseries. However, the above databases do not always agree on names.

Other References:

- **Digital Atlas of Virginia Flora** (<http://vaplantatlas.org/index.php?do=plant&plant=2394&search=Search>). Species distribution maps by county & photos of many plants.
- **Flora of Virginia**. Alan Weakley, J. Christopher Ludwig, and John Townsend. 2012. BRIT Press. Botanical Research Institute of Texas.
- **Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change**. Larry Weaner & Thomas Christopher. Meadows and a more naturalistic style of gardening are emphasized.
- **Kemper Center for Home Gardening Plantfinder**. Missouri Botanical Garden. An excellent reference for plant names, gardening information, and photographs of ornamental plants (<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder/plantfindersearch.aspx>). It features plants in their Kemper Center display gardens.
- **Landscaping With Native Plants**. Maryland Native Plant Society. (<http://www.mdflora.org/resources/Publications/GardenersGuidelines/Landscaping-Natives.pdf>).
- **The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden**. Rick Darke & Douglas Tallamy.
- **Maryland Plant Atlas** (<http://www.marylandplantatlas.org>). Species distribution maps by county. Also **Maryland Biodiversity Project** (<http://www.marylandbiodiversity.com/>) – look for checklists under **Plants** & photos of many plants.
- **Minnesota Wildflowers. A Field Guide to the Flora of Minnesota**. Excellent side-by-side photos of native plants grouped by category. Most plants are also native to Virginia (<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/>).
- **Native Plant Information Network**. Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Information about native plants throughout the U.S. (<http://www.wildflower.org/explore/>).
- **Native Plants for Northern Virginia** (<http://www.plantnovanatives.org/>). It is a publication of the Plant NoVANatives initiative, which includes the Virginia Native Plant Society.
- **Planting in a Post-Wild World: Designing Plant Communities for Resilient Landscapes**. Thomas Rainer and Claudia West. A design approach that explores how to create & manage designed plant communities. For more advanced gardeners.
- **USDA PLANTS Database** (<http://plants.usda.gov/java/>) - this database focuses on plants native to the U.S. and to U.S. Territories and Protectorates, as well as naturalized non-natives and invasives. It is also used to determine distribution within Virginia by county.
(Developed by Brenda Skarphol, Curatorial Horticulturist at Green Spring Gardens. Revised 9/30/2016.)



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