



Cornell University



## Weed-Suppressive Groundcovers

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What's in a name? A groundcover is a perennial plant used en masse for its visual wallop—and to crowd out weeds. Many are gorgeous perennials that gardeners have used in flower borders for years. Now we're finding that some are top performers in the "tough sites" department too. Fewer weeds means less herbicide use. Good news for you ... and for the environment.

The plants listed here have been evaluated under different growing conditions for their ease of establishment, low maintenance characteristics and their ability to exclude weeds. Our initial screening tests took place in Ithaca (Finger Lakes region, zone 5) and Riverhead (eastern Long Island, zone 7), New York. Since then demonstration plots have been established across New York State. This table summarizes the growth characteristics for the top rated groundcovers. All of these plants will perform well in full sun and many will do well in part shade too. If you are interested in native plants look for those that originate in North America.

Common Name	Genus & species	Habit	Zone	Height	Origin	Aesthetics	Culture
Lady's mantle	<i>Alchemilla mollis</i>	Clump forming	4-7	12-18"	Asia	Large round light green-gray leaves sparkle when holding moisture droplets	Full sun or partial shade Likes moist soil
Butterfly Milkweed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Sprawling	3-9	12-24"	North America	Dark green foliage. Bright orange flowers in summer are very attractive to butterflies. Interesting upright seed pods late in the season	Full sun Drought tolerant Prune back spent stems in late winter or spring. New foliage emerges later than most perennials.
White Heath Aster 'Snow Flurry'	<i>Aster ericoides</i>	Low, dense mound	3-9	3-6"	North America	Mounding dark green foliage covered with white flowers in September	Full sun to partial shade Drought tolerant
Blue Wood Sedge	<i>Carex flaccosperma</i>	Dense, clump	5-8	6-12"	North America	Blue-green wide bladed grass-like foliage. Interesting slender seed heads are formed in the spring.	Partial shade to shade Benefits from cutting back in late winter



Lady's mantle, *Alchemilla mollis*



Butterfly Milkweed, *Asclepias tuberosa*



White Heath Aster, *Aster ericoides*



Blue Wood Sedge, *Carex flaccosperma*

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Leadwort	<i>Ceratostigma plumbaginoides</i>	Mat forming	5-9	8-12"	Asia	Lime-green foliage with tinges of red. Clear blue star-shaped flowers with red seedheads, summer to fall.	Full sun to partial shade. Grows best in dry soils. Vigorous grower, may spread in garden bed.
Coral bells 'Chocolate Veil' or 'Chocolate Ruffles'	<i>Heuchera americana</i>	Clump forming	4-9	18-24"	North America	Deep maroon foliage, small delicate pink flowers on tall flower spikes.	Full sun to partial Shade Evergreen in mild winters prune out damaged foliage in spring.
Liriope	<i>Liriope spicata</i>	Clump forming	4-10	8-12"	Asia	Dark green grass-like evergreen foliage, summer flower spikes in shades from light purple to violet.	Full sun to partial shade. Can benefit from a spring shearing if foliage became winter damaged.
Catmint 'Walker's Low'	<i>Nepeta x faassenii</i>	Upright and sprawling	3-8	18-24"	Eurasia, Africa	Green-grey foliage. Long lasting blue flowers in spring-summer.	Full sun Vigorous grower, give it room so it doesn't crowd out neighboring plants.
Moss Phlox 'Emerald Blue'	<i>Phlox subulata</i>	Mat forming	3-9	4-6"	North America	Profusion of early spring blue blooms, glossy evergreen foliage.	Full sun, Tolerates drought and even a little salt. Grows best in well drained soil.
Salvia 'Blue Hills'	<i>Salvia nemorosa</i>	Clump forming	4-8	18-24"	Europe	Blue flowers late spring through early fall attractive to pollinators and humming birds.	Full sun Cut back after first bloom to encourage vigorous re-bloom.
Little Bluestem 'The Blues'	<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	Clump forming	5-9	20-40"	North America	Tall slender blue-green leaves turning to golden bronze in fall. Looks best planted in large groups where it is free to bend and sway providing a prairie look.	Full sun. Remove last year's foliage by cutting to ground in late winter/early spring.
Two-row Stonecrop 'John Creech'	<i>Sedum spurium</i>	Creeping	3-8	3-6"	Asia	Low grower with small, fleshy, evergreen leaves and pink flowers in late summer and early fall	Full sun to partial shade. Grows best in dry soils.
Autumn Goldenrod 'Golden Fleece'	<i>Solidago sphacelata</i>	Upright	2-8	18"	North America	Broad dark green foliage with late summer display of yellow blooms	Full sun Removing spent flower stalks in the spring gives the plant a more refined look.
Northern Prairie Dropseed	<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>	Clump forming	3-9	24-48"	North America	Graceful fine textured grass. In late summer tall lightly fragrant flowers/ seed heads are produced. Foliage fades golden to bronze in fall/winter.	Full sun Good drought tolerance Grows best in well drained soils.



**Leadwort,**  
*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*



**Coral bells, *Heuchera americana***



**Liriope, *Liriope spicata***



**Catmint, *Nepeta x faassenii***



**Moss Phlox, *Phlox subulata***



**Salvia, *Salvia nemorosa***



**Two-row Stonecrop, *Sedum spurium***



**Autumn Goldenrod,**  
*Solidago sphacelata*



**Northern Prairie Dropseed,**  
*Sporobolus heterolepis*



**Little Bluestem,**  
*Schizachyrium scoparium*

These plants are tough and weed suppressive once they are established but need some care when you put them in the ground.

### **Establishment**

Here are some points to follow to start them off right:

- **Start Clean:** Plant only on a site that is free of weeds. If there are perennial weeds with fleshy roots, take time to completely kill or remove them before going any further.
- **Add Compost:** If the soil conditions are too sandy or clayey, till in organic matter—compost is best. It will loosen a heavy soil and help a sandy soil hold onto water and nutrients.
- **Mulch:** Apply mulch at a depth of about 3 inches. Shredded bark mulch works wonders in the “keep-weeds-out-while-your-plants-are-young” department. Find mulch at your garden center.
- **Water:** Soak plants well at planting and keep the soil moist until they’re established.
- **Hand weed:** Keep the weeds out while your groundcovers are filling in! Don’t expect them to work miracles. Plan to hand weed once or twice during the first year. Once established, your plants should require little weeding.

### **Maintenance**

The groundcovers that have late season flowers like autumn goldenrod will benefit from a winter or early spring shearing, removing the spent seed heads and damaged foliage.

Although the established groundcovers will not need mulch among the plants it is helpful to mulch the margins to discourage weed encroachment from outside the plot.

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