

Cover your Ground!

Anyone who has spent time weeding a garden through a whole season knows that bare ground does not stay that way for long. It is quickly colonized by volunteer plants we generally label as weeds. We could simply pile on mulch every year and be done with it, but how boring and sterile a landscape is that? Alternatively, we could apply herbicides multiple times throughout the season, but who wants to pollute the environment and expose themselves, their family and pets to unsafe chemicals? Not me. I like to walk around my garden barefoot. Besides, groundcovers make the most effective pre-emergent herbicide of all. Experienced gardeners know that weeding, as a maintenance function, drops off to next to nothing when a garden bed reaches full coverage of the ground surface. Why not beat the weeds to the punch, hold off on the herbicides and plant groundcovers?

Groundcovers do more than simply choke out weeds. When we incorporate groundcovers into our garden beds and allow some tree leaves and twigs to accumulate among their foliage, we allow decomposition to occur on site. This gives nutrients and beneficial microbes back to our garden soils. By doing so, we reduce the need for fertilizer applications and promote a healthier soil. Picture a shrub bed with pulmonarias, tiarellas and carexes as the groundcovers. Instead of sanitizing the bed each fall of all leaf matter, allow some of it to accumulate between and among plants. Not only will it improve the soil, but it will also act as an insulator to buffer the plants from winter injury.

Groundcovers can help to reduce water and pesticide needs also. We can select plants that have low water requirements. We can also reduce, if not eliminate, the need for pesticides through selection of species or varieties not prone to insects and diseases. It is also important to remember to site plants where they will thrive as a means of avoiding insect and disease problems!

By their presence alone, groundcovers discourage foot traffic when planted around trees. Foot traffic causes a reduction in soil porosity that limits the ability of tree roots to breathe which can lead to poor health. Consider using groundcovers as a way of avoiding conflicts between people and trees. Tough groundcovers such as *Carex 'Ice Dance'* and *Rubus calycinoides* would be good candidates for such situations.

Looked at from an ecological perspective, groundcovers are the “third layer” in our gardens just as they are in nature. Trees and shrubs comprise the first and second layers, respectively. It is these three layers together that create a diversity of habitat necessary to attract much of the wildlife in our communities. By including a “third layer” we are encouraging a greater diversity of wildlife. Birds and other animals will find the cover they need for nesting, hunting and foraging. Some groundcovers will also provide a food source in their flower nectar, fruit and seeds. As gardeners we understand that our gardens are a part of the natural world and we are their stewards.

Glover Perennials is committed to helping you select the best groundcovers for your needs.