

# Ground Covers for Rough Sites

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL, FOOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

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A well-chosen ground cover may be the answer to homeowners who don't know what to plant on weedy, eroding banks or on sites where regular care is impossible. These difficult sites require plants that establish readily, grow in poor soils, and require little or no care after establishment.

Grasses are often the best ground cover for sunny sites. For quick, temporary cover the following annual grasses can be used: cereal rye (*Secale cereale*), oats (*Avena sativa*), and annual ryegrass (*Lolium multiflorum*). Because they germinate in less than a week, but live only until winter, use them only as a stopgap measure until a permanent planting can be established. Perennial lawn grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*) and fine fescue (*Festuca* spp.) are suitable choices for banks and rough sites. These can be used in poor sites in low maintenance situations where mowing is not required. They can be seeded in conjunction with annual grasses or planted as sod. Depending on the desired appearance, these grasses can survive with only one or two mowings per year.

Native grasses can be used for permanent cover. They may be mixed with native flowering plants. Canada wildrye (*Elymus canadensis*) covers the ground rapidly, has attractive nodding heads, and readily self-seeds. It is also somewhat shade-tolerant. Sheep fescue (*Festuca ovina*) is commonly found in sandy soils, is quite drought- and shade-tolerant. A bunch grass, it can be seeded with non-native red fescue (*Festuca rubra*) or hard fescue (*Festuca longifolia*). Mixtures of fine fescues make an attractive, fine-textured, low-maintenance ground cover. Side-oats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*) is a common dry prairie grass which grows well on steep slopes. It needs at least partial sun. Sand dropseed

(*Sporobolus cryptandrus*), another dry prairie grass, can be planted either in sand or on heavier soils. A pioneer on disturbed areas, it is deep-rooted and very drought-tolerant. A non-native, smooth brome grass, (*Bromus inermis*) has been used by highway departments on poor sites because it covers slopes rapidly. However, the site must be chosen carefully as brome grass is **very invasive**, will replace native vegetation and should be used with caution. Brome grass is not a good choice where native material is suitable, particularly at lake homes.

Certain grasses also can be used in **ditch plantings**, where they not only control erosion but reduce and direct water movement. Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) and prairie cordgrass (*Spartina pectinata*) are good native grasses for ditch slope plantings. Reed canarygrass (*Phalaris arundinaceae*) can grow in standing water and has taken over vast areas of wetland across Minnesota and much of the Midwest. It should be planted with caution because of its aggressive growth.

Bird's-foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), a legume, can be seeded in ditch bottoms and slopes (see table) but is also extremely aggressive and creates a huge seedbank in the soil. If you need a quick cover to hold the soil, sodding with Kentucky bluegrass may provide a temporary solution. The bluegrass will not provide permanent cover because it cannot grow in wet soils over long periods.

The following list of suitable ground covers are good choices for Minnesota. They are easy to grow, establish quickly and provide long-term dependable growth. With few exceptions, all are fully hardy throughout the state.

Ground Covers for Low-Maintenance Sites

Plant*	Height	Tolerances†		Site Preference †	Outstanding Features	Propagation**	Comments
		Shade	Drought				
<b>Herbaceous Plants</b> Barrenstrawberry (N) ( <i>Waldsteinia fragarioides</i> )	6"	++	++	Dry sandy soils. Indifferent to pH.	Spreads from rhizomes. Can be grown in sun.	Transplants	Strawberry-like plants with inedible fruit.
Wineleaf Cinquefoil (N) ( <i>Potentilla tridentata</i> )	6-12"	-	++	Poor acidic soils, rocky or sandy soils.	Almost prostrate. Turns wine-red in fall.	Transplants	Available.
Creeping Charlie ( <i>Glechoma hederacea</i> )	4"	++	+	Fairly moist woods soils.	Fragrant leaves, purple flowers.	Transplants	Very invasive in shade; will spread into lawns.
Crownvetch ( <i>Coronilla varia</i> )	1-3'	+	+	Can withstand dry, infertile soils. Nearly neutral in pH. Can grow on clay.	One plant can cover 6' in 2-3 years. Attractive flowers. Long-lasting.	Seed (with inoculant), seedlings, or crowns	Slow to establish. Can be seeded with ryegrass, fescue, or bird's-foot trefoil. Available. Can't be mowed. May show winter injury.
Daylily, Tawny ( <i>Hemerocallis fulva</i> )	3'	+	+	Adapted to wide range of well-drained soils. Quite salt- tolerant.	Attractive flowers. Long leaves produce heavy ground cover. Excellent erosion control.	Division of root stock, crowns	Commonly available.

**Ground Covers for Low-Maintenance Sites (cont.)**

Plant*	Height	Tolerances†		Site Preference †	Outstanding Features	Propagation**	Comments
		Shade	Drought				
Fleeceflower, Compact Japanese ( <i>Polygonum cuspidatum compactum</i> )	2-3'	+	+	Good or poor soil, sun or shade.	Vigorous competitive ground cover.	Crown division	Can be extremely invasive.
Goutweed ( <i>Aegopodium podagraria</i> )	6-12"	++	++	Good or poor soil, sun or shade.	Vigorous. Variety with white-edged leaves available.	Transplants	Can become invasive. Complete dieback in winter. Available.
Hosta ( <i>Hosta</i> spp.)	6-24"	++	-	Rich, moist, well-drained soils. Will burn in sun.	Lush growth with large, often variegated leaves. Rather formal.	Transplants	Foliage appears late in spring. Available.
Lily-of-the-Valley ( <i>Convallaria majalis</i> )	6"	++	+	Grows in poor soil & under trees & shrubs	Attractive yellow flowers.	Transplants	Dies back in winter. Available.
Moneywort ( <i>Lysimachia nummularia</i> )	3-6"	+	-	Needs moisture in drought.	Attractive yellow flowers.	Seeds, cuttings	Long, trailing stems.
Yellow Archangel ( <i>Lamium galabardon</i> ) 'Variegatum'	1-11/2'	++	+	Very shade-tolerant.	Grows rapidly. Yellow flowers.	Cuttings, division	Aggressive. May need confinement.
Strawberry (N) ( <i>Fragaria virginiana</i> )	4"	+ (sun also)	+	Found in dry upland fields & woods.	Low & compact. Edible fruit.	Transplants	Smaller than commercial varieties.
Trefoil, Bird's-foot ( <i>Lotus corniculatus</i> )	1'	+	++ (moist also)	Tolerates very poor soils & wide pH range. Heat-resistant. Salt-tolerant.	One plant covers 2½' first year. Attractive yellow flowers.	Seed (with inoculant), crown division, or cuttings	Can seed with ryegrass or oats. May be mowed. Available.
Violets (N) ( <i>Viola</i> spp.)	6"	++ (sun also)	+	Fairly rich, well-drained soils.	Spreads rapidly. Attractive flowers. Semi-evergreen.	Transplants	Certain varieties may be invasive. Available.
<b>Woody Plants</b> Barberry, Korean ( <i>Berberis koreana</i> )	6-8'	+	+	Tolerates most soils.	Yellow flowers, red fruits persist over winter.	Transplants, suckers, seed	Good coarse woody bank cover.
Bush-honeysuckle ( <i>Dierrevilla lonicera</i> (N), <i>D. rivularis</i> & <i>D. sessilifolia</i> )	3-4'	+ (sun also)	+	Dry banks in open woods or in full sun. Acid to around neutral pH.	Inconspicuous flowers. Can be planted with smaller native flowers.	Transplants	Available.
Chokeberry (N) ( <i>Aronia melanocarpa</i> )	1-2'	++	++	Tolerates most soils. Use on steep dry banks. Tolerates acid soils.	Attractive foliage, flowers, & fruits.	Transplants	Readily available.
Creepers, Virginia & Thicket (N) ( <i>Parthenocissus quinquefolia</i> & <i>P. inserta</i> )	1'	++	+	Shaded dry banks.	Large handsome leaves. Virginia more vigorous vine & will climb.	Transplants	Engelmann variety commonly available.
Snowberry ( <i>Symphoricarpos albus</i> )	3'	+	+	Broadly adapted to soil & pH. Steep dry banks.	Inconspicuous flower white fruit, berries	Transplants, cuttings, & division	Available.
Spirea, Ural False ( <i>Sorbaria sorbifolia</i> )	4-6'	+	+	Good or poor soil, sun or shade.	Heavy foliage, attractive flowers.	Transplants, suckers	Coarse bank cover for shade or sun.
Fragrant Sumac ( <i>Rhus aromatica</i> )	2-6'	+	++	Tolerates most soils.	Attractive foliage, fall color.	Transplants, seed	Good for sunny, dry banks.
Skunkbush Sumac ( <i>Rhus trilobata</i> )	4-6'	+	++	Tolerates most soils.	Attractive foliage.	Transplants, seed	Tolerates dry sites.
Sumacs (N), smooth & staghorn ( <i>Rhus glabra</i> & <i>R. typhina</i> )	10'	+	+	Poor soils & sandy gravelly knolls. Can be used in most soils.	Suckers & spreads but needs grass or herbs beneath. Good fall color.	Seeds or root cuttings	Readily available. Split-leaf forms also available.
Sweetfern (N) ( <i>Comptonia peregrina</i> )	2'	+	++	Acidic, sandy soils. Most poor soils but will grow on good soils too. Salt-tolerant.	Aromatic fern-like leaves. Spreads from underground stems.	Transplants	Available.

\*key to symbols used: ++ = excellent; + = good; - = intolerant.

\*N indicates that the plant is native to Minnesota.

† pH is an expression of soil acidity or alkalinity.

\*\*Space herbaceous plants 1' apart (1,000 plants/1,000 sq. ft.). Space woody plants 2' apart (250 plants/1,000 sq. ft.).

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