



Alternatives to Lawn: Groundcovers

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Groundcover plants are low growing perennials that spread by trailing stems and cover an area of the ground. Groundcovers provide an excellent alternative for turfgrasses in shade and other tough areas in the landscape. Established groundcovers require relatively low maintenance, outcompete weeds, reduce soil erosion, provide habitat for pollinators, and enhance aesthetic beauty in the landscape.

However, groundcovers are not ideal for all site locations and are not totally maintenance free. Unlike lawn, most groundcovers will not withstand heavy foot traffic very well. Groundcovers require initial maintenance like irrigation, fertilization, mulching and weed control until they are fully established. Some groundcover plant species can be aggressive and may require trimming and edging from time to time to control their spread.



Photo: Biokova Geranium (*Gernaium x cantabrigiense* 'Biokova'), a vigorous mat-forming groundcover that grows best in moist shaded areas.

Below is a list of common groundcovers recommended for Wisconsin landscapes.

Common name	Botanical Name	Cultivars	Light requirement	Cold hardiness	Growth habit (Height x width)	Soil condition	Other characteristics
Bugleweed, Carpetweed	<i>Ajuga reptans</i>	'Binblasca', 'Bronze Beauty', 'Burgundy Glow', 'Catlin's Giant', 'Princess Nadia', 'Carpet Bulge', 'Tropical Toucan'	Shade, part shade	Zone: 4	3" - 8" x 8" -24"	Moist, well-drained	Slow growth rate, small blue-purple tubular flowers in spikes, blooms in spring, pollinator friendly
Alpine Lady's Mantle	<i>Alchemilla alpina</i>		Part sun to part shade	Zone: 3	2" - 3" x 12" - 18"	Average to dry	Deeply lobed star-like leaves

							with silvery edges, small clusters of tiny chartreuse flowers, tolerates light foot traffic
Pussytoes, Catsfoot	<i>Antennaria dioica</i>	'Rubra' (Pink Pussytoes)	Full sun	Zone: 3	0.5"x 1.5"	Dry	Slow growth rate, soft gray foliage, tiny white to pale pink flowers, blooms in late spring, takes heat well, tolerates light foot traffic
European wild ginger	<i>Asarum europaeum</i>	'Eco Choice', 'Eco Red Giant'	Part shade to shade	Zone: 4	3"-6" x 8"-18"	Moist, well-drained	Slow to moderate growth rate, glossy dark green rounded leaves, semi-evergreen
Canada wild ginger	<i>Asarum canadense</i>		Part shade to shade	Zone: 4	6-12" x 12-18"	Moist, well-drained	Native to Wisconsin, moderate growth rate, small red triangular flower under the leaves, pollinator friendly, tolerates somewhat drier shade once established
Serbian, Dalmatian Bellflowers	<i>Campanula poscharskyana</i> , <i>C. portenschlagiana</i> ,	'Aurea', 'Blue Waterfall', 'Alba'	Sun to part sun	Zone: 3 Zone: 4	2" - 5" x 12" - 20"	Average to moist well-drained to dry soils	Small heart-shaped leaves form a mat, purple starry bell-like flowers in late spring, tolerates some drought and very light foot traffic
Variegated Japanese sedge,	<i>Carex ciliatomarginata</i>	'Treasure Island' (plant is usually sold as this cultivar only)	Light shade to shade	Zone: 5	2" - 4" x 12" - 20"	Average to moist	Wide, variegated low-growing and arching blades, needs fall or spring cleanup

Blue Sedge, Glaucous Sedge	<i>Carex flacca</i>	'Blue Zinger', 'Mini'	Sun to part shade to shade	Zone: 4	8" - 10" x 12" - 24"	Moist, moist well-drained to drier sites (in shade)	Blue foliage, blades arching to laying horizontal
Pennsylvania Sedge	<i>Carex pennsylvanica</i>		Shade	Zone: 3	6-12" x 6-12"	Dry	Native, moderate growth rate, grass-like blades, medium green, arching narrow leaves, spreads by rhizomes, pollinator friendly
Creeping broadleafed Sedge	<i>Carex siderosticha</i>	'Banana Boat', 'Snow Cap	Full shade	Zone: 5	4" - 8" x 12" - 18"	Average to moist	'Banana Boat'; bright yellow and green variegated arching wide blades, will burn in sun, 'Snow Cap': white and dark green variegation, same growth habit
Dianthus (low growing cultivars only)	<i>Dianthus caesius (gratianopolitanus), D. simulans, hybrids</i>	Mountain Frost™ White Twinkle, 'Fire Witch', Cheddar pinks (various)	Sun to part sun	Zone: 4b	2" - 6" x 12" - 18"	Average to dry soils, need good drainage	Slow growth rate, short grass-like leaves, some blue in color, white or dark pink long-blooming flowers with fringed edges (shear back stalks after bloom to re-bloom), some cultivars tolerate light foot traffic
Barrenwort, Bishop's Hat	<i>Epimedium sp.</i>	'Violaceum', 'Crimson Beauty', 'Lilac Fairy', 'Nanum', 'Rose Queen', 'White Queen', X rubrum, 'Sulphureum'	Shade, part shade	Zone: 4	8"-12" x 18" - 24"	Dry, moist well-drained	Slow growth rate, co-exists with tree roots in dry shaded areas, heart-shaped leaves, blooms in late spring, attractive fall

							color in a few species
Purple leaf Wintercreeper	<i>Euonymus fortunei</i>	'Coloratus'	Part sun, part shade	Zone: 4	8" x 12"	Moist, well-drained	Moderate to fast growth rate, evergreen, foliage turns purplish bronze in fall
Cranesbill	<i>Geranium sp.</i>	'Biokovo', 'Karmina', 'Ballerina', 'Claridge Druce', 'Striatum', 'sanguineum', 'Nanum'	Sun, part sun part shade	Zone: 4	6"-8" x 12"- 24"	Moist, well-drained	Moderate growth rate, blooms late spring to summer, light pink to magenta flowers pollinator friendly, good fall color, some tolerate very light foot traffic
Sweet woodruff	<i>Galium odoratum</i>		Shade, part shade	Zone: 4	3"-6" x 8" -12"	Moist, well-drained	Moderate to fast growth rate, fragrant white flowers in early spring, star-shaped foliage, not tolerant of dry shade
English Ivy	<i>Hedera helix</i>	'Thorndale', 'Wilsonii'	Full sun, shade, part shade	Zone: 4	6"-8" x 12"-18"	Moist, Well-drained	Fast growth rate, evergreen foliage
Candytuft	<i>Iberis sempervirens</i>	'Snowflake'	Full sun	Zone: 3	8"-12" x 18"-24"	Average well-drained to dry	Moderate growth rate, clusters of white flower late spring to early summer, does not tolerate wet soils
Hosta (dwarf stoloniferous varieties only)	<i>Hosta sp.</i>	'Blue Mouse Ears', 'Lemon-Lime', 'Thumb Nail'	Shade, part shade	Zone: 3	2" - 6" x 12" - 24"	Moist, well-drained	Slow to moderate growth rate, may tolerate drier shade once established, flower scapes are taller than leaves
Lamium, Spotted deadnettle	<i>Lamium maculatum</i>	'Beacon silver', 'Aureum',	Shade, part shade	Zone: 3	8" - 12" x 8"x 24"	Moist, well-drained	Fast growth rate, aggressive,

		'Chequers', 'Ghost', 'Orchid Frost', 'Red Nancy', 'Shell Pink', 'White Nancy'					variegated silver or gold foliage, clusters of pink, purple, or white flowers in spring
Moneywort	<i>Lysimachia nummularia</i>	'Aurea'	Part sun, part shade, shade	Zone: 3	1" - 2" x 18" - 24"	Moist, well drained	Fast growth rate, yellow flowers in early summer, 'Aurea' -yellow leaves. Will tolerate morning sun if moisture is sufficient. Tolerates light foot traffic. Note: The all-green form (but not this gold-leaved form) is on the WI DNR invasive plants list
Mazus	<i>Mazus reptans</i>		Part shade, part sun	Zone 5	1" - 2" x 18" - 24"	Moist, well drained to moist	Low ground-hugger, tolerates light foot traffic, does not tolerate dry soil, pale purple three-lobed flowers in late spring
Golden Oregano	<i>Origanum vulgare</i>	'Aureum'	Full sun, part sun	Zone 4	6" - 8" x 12" - 20"	Moist, well-drained	Moderate growth rate, golden foliage, lavender flowers in summer, also has culinary use, will tolerate some drought once established
Moss phlox	<i>Phlox subulata</i>	'Emerald Pink', 'Emerald Blue', 'Purple Beauty', 'Snowflake',	Full sun	Zone: 4	3" - 6" x 8" - 24"	Moist, well-drained	Moderate growth rate, carpet of blooms in late spring
Creeping Phlox	<i>Phlox stolonifera</i>	'Sherwood Purple'	Part shade, shade	Zone: 5	2" - 6" x 12" - 24"	Average to moist, well-	Oval leaves on reddish ground-

						drained, not tolerant of dry shade	hugging stems, purple pinwheel-like blooms on 6" flower stalks, good bloomer in shade for spring
Allegheny spurge, mountain pachysandra	<i>Pachysandra procumbens</i>		Part shade, shade	Zone: 5	6" - 10" x 12" - 18"	Average to moist, to drier soils	U.S. native, tolerates some drought when established, slow growth rate, green to mottled silver leaves, 4" tall spikes of white fragrant flowers in late spring
Pachysandra, Japanese spurge	<i>Pachysandra terminalis</i>	'Green Carpet', 'Variegata', 'Silveredge'	Shade, part shade	Zone:4	6" - 8" x 12" - 18"	Moist, well-drained	Slow growth rate, evergreen, spikes of white flowers in late spring
Dwarf Solomon's Seal	<i>Polygonatum humile</i>		Part shade, shade	Zone: 5	6" - 8" x 12" - 18"	Moist, well-drained	Slow to moderate growth rate, bell-like creamy white flowers in late spring, intolerant of dry shade
Alpine Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla neumanniana</i>	'Nana'	Full sun, part shade	Zone: 3	3 - 6" x 8"-12"	Average well-drained to dry	Slow to moderate growth rate, yellow flowers in spring, salt tolerant, not tolerant of heavy clay or moist soils
Self-heal, heal-all	<i>Prunella vulgaris ssp. lanceolata</i>	'Magdalena' (6" x 12"), 'Under the Sea'	Full sun, part shade		12-24" but can keep mowed to 3" tall x 8" - 15"	Moist, well-drained	Native, great for attracting bees, blooms June-August, purple flowers, moderate growth rate, may be aggressive in moist shade, deer resistant
Rock Soapwort	<i>Saponaria ocymoides</i>		Full sun, part sun	Zone 2	4" - 6" x 12" -18"	Dry to average	Semi-evergreen,

							slow to moderate growth rate, likes slightly alkaline soils, does not tolerate heavy clay, tolerates some drought once established, bright pink flowers in spring-summer, after flowering shear back by half to encourage more branching and re-flowering, intolerant of wet heavy soils
Stonecrop	<i>Sedum sp.</i>	Aureum', 'Coral Carpet', 'Green Ice', 'Murale', Bertram Anderson', 'Bailey's Gold'	Full sun	Zone: 3	1" - 3" x 8" - 18"	Dry, well- drained soil	Slow growth rate, evergreen succulents, blooms mid- to late summer, pollinator friendly, not tolerant of heavy clay or moist soils
Lamb's ear	<i>Stachys byzantina</i>	'Cotton Boll', 'Big Ears' 'Silver Carpet'	Full sun, part sun	Zone: 3	6" - 8" x 18" - 24"	Dry, well- drained to average soils	Moderate growth rate, very fuzzy silvery foliage, spikes of purple, or fuzzy silver flowers in early summer
Dwarf Germander	<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i>	'Nanum'	Full sun, part sun	Zone: 5	4" - 8"	Dry, well- drained to average soils	Semi-woody stems, moderate to fast spread, not tolerant of moist soils or much shade, purple flowers in summer
Creeping Thyme	<i>Thymus sp.</i>	'Doone Valley', 'Coccineus', 'Pink Chintz', ' Purple Carpet',	Full sun (preferred) to part sun	Zone: 4	1" - 6" x 8" - 24"	Dry, well- drained	Slow to moderate growth rate, aromatic foliage, pink, purple, white

		'Elfin', 'Dorothy Klaber', 'Mother-of-Thyme', Wooly thyme					or red flowers in early summer, very pollinator friendly, tolerates light foot traffic
Dutch White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>		Full sun, part sun, part shade	Zone: 3	3" - 5" x 12" - 24"		Forms a mat, takes foot traffic, pollinator friendly, creamy white flowers May to September
Verbena	<i>xhybrida</i>	'Lizzie'	Full sun, part sun	Zone: 5	6" - 8" x 18" - 24"	Average to dry	Forms a solid mat, fast to moderate growth rate, magenta pink 1.5" flower clusters, in full sun will bloom late May to October, pollinator friendly
Speedwell	<i>Veronica sp.</i>	'Tidal Pool', 'Waterperry Blue', Crater Lake Blue', 'Trehane', 'Aztec Gold', 'Whitewater', 'Crystal Lake Blue'	Full sun, part shade	Zone: 3	3" - 6" x 12"-24"	Average to dry,	Fast to moderate growth rate, white to blue flowers in late spring
Barren Strawberry	<i>Waldsteinia ternata</i>		Sun, part shade	Zone: 3	6"- 8" x 18"- 24"	Dry moist, well-drained	Strawberry-like plant, moderate growth rate, yellow flowers in mid spring to early summer, evergreen, inedible fruits

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