

Groundcovers: Living Mulch

By Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener, October, 2024

Fall is finally here, and it won't be long before the first frosts creep across our landscapes. If you have an area of garden, lawn, or turf that's hard to manage, try a living or "green" mulch.

Why a living mulch? A good "green" mulch suppresses weeds, helps control erosion and stormwater runoff, provides food and habitat for wildlife/insects, and often continues growing long into winter, according to Miri Talabac, lead horticulture coordinator of the Home and Garden Information Center (HGIC) at the University of Maryland Extension Service.

Instead of the traditional groundcovers such as periwinkle (*vinca major*), ajuga, Japanese pachysandra, or Bishop's weed, all of which can be invasive, you might consider one or more of the living mulches, both native and nonnative, listed below. And interestingly, not all are ground-creepers. Some may grow more than a foot tall and wide. Several planted fairly close together will shield the ground and prevent most weeds from growing, while making a lovely green vista.

NATIVE TO THE U.S.

Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*): Allegheny spurge, native to the southeastern U.S., is both drought- and shade-tolerant, loves acidic soil, but also tolerates more alkaline soils. Unlike the traditional pachysandra, its light green, serrated leaves have more of a bluish tinge, and cluster in whorls around the stalk. The plant grows up to one foot tall, up to two feet wide.

Golden ragwort (*Packera aurea*): Ragwort has big, heart-shaped leaves and blooms in early spring with daisy-like single-petaled flowers. The flowers are light yellow with darker yellow centers. Among the taller of groundcovers, ragwort, an eastern North American native, grows to about 2½ feet tall and wide. It spreads quickly through both rhizomes and seeds but is fairly easy to control. It grows well in dry shade.

Goldenstar (*Chrysogonum virginianum*): Goldenstar is an eastern U.S. native. Each plant grows to about 12 inches tall and nearly 18 inches wide. It is shade-tolerant and prefers a moist soil. If its conditions are met, it blooms with yellow flowers in the spring and intermittently throughout the summer.

Meehan's mint (*Meehania cordata*): Native to eastern North America, Meehan's mint gets about 3-6 inches tall, and 3-18 inches wide. It grows well in both sun and deep shade, as long as it has a moist soil. The flowers are a lighter lavender and fill the stalks rising above its glossy green, rounded leaves.

Quamash (*Camassia leichtlinii*): This native to western North America has bell-shaped, light lavender flowers that cluster along straight spears of stalks amid blade-shaped leaves.

Spring cinquefoil (*Potentilla neumanniana*): Spring cinquefoil has glossy green, serrated leaves; pale yellow flowers with five petals and a pale yellow center; and clusters of five serrated leaves edged with a touch of purple. Although considered a North American native, it grows all over the world.

NONNATIVES

Bergenia (*Bergenia cordifolia*) boasts broad, bright green leaves with slightly ruffled edges. Bergenia is not native to the U.S., but rather to Asia.

Jack Frost brunnera (*Brunnera macrophylla*): From eastern Europe and northwest Asia, this low-growing plant has small, heart-shaped leaves, mainly white with green edges and green veins showing through.

Hostas: Your grandmother's beloved hostas, which are not native to the U.S., are also excellent as decorative groundcovers in dry shady/partially shady areas. Today's varieties come in sizes ranging from about six inches to 18 inches tall; can be found in shades/mixtures/textures of green, chartreuse, and white, with broad or narrow, smooth or seersucker-wrinkled leaves; and will last until a hard frost. Many send up stalks of lavender or white bell flowers in early to mid-summer, or even in early fall.

Lungwort (*Pulmonaria* spp. and cvs.): Also low-growing, lungwort has clusters of long, narrow leaves growing out from a central point. Older leaves have slightly crinkled edges. Widely planted now, it's originally from Europe and Asia.

Yellow corydalis (*Corydalis lutea*): This non-native boasts clusters of trumpet-shaped yellow flowers at top of the stalk and numerous small leaves. Grown almost everywhere, it is native to the alpine regions of Europe.

Of course, there are lots more groundcovers than those listed. If you seek information for more groundcover choices, or for upcoming seminars, Master Gardener certification classes, or other activities, explore the Frederick County Extension Master Gardener/Horticulture Program links below, or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office at 301-600-1596.

- FCMG website: bit.ly/FCMG-Home-Gardening
- Facebook: <https://bit.ly/FCMGFacebook>
- Instagram: <https://bit.ly/FCMGinstagram>
- University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information Center for gardening information and advice: bit.ly/UME-HGIC
- Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>



Giant Hosta:

Hostas are a non-traditional choice of groundcover. They come in many varieties and sizes and can be used as a “living” or “green” mulch. These giant hostas, with broad seersucker-like leaves, grow in a dense clump to about 1½ feet tall and 2-3 feet wide. They do best in full to partial shade. (photo courtesy of the author)



Small Hosta:

Hostas can have variegated and narrow, smooth leaves. This species has chartreuse center with dark green edging on the leaves and grow only about 8 inches tall and send up shoots of lavender, bell-shaped flowers in early- to mid-summer. (photo courtesy of the author)

Hosta Flowers:

Most hosta send up tall stalks of bell-shaped flowers in early- to mid-summer, although some bloom in late summer or early fall. (photo courtesy of the author)



Japanese Painted Fern:

The Japanese painted fern is an unusual choice for a groundcover. It is a small fern and slow-growing but the plant is spectacular in its soft colors—its fronds are a gray-green with dark purple stems. (photo courtesy of the author)

Ostrich Ferns:

Though not usually considered a groundcover, native ostrich ferns grow well in partially to fully shaded areas. Depending on how much rain they get in spring, the bright green fronds may grow as tall as three to four feet in our climate. They spread slowly by rhizomes, and in autumn, the dark brown curly shoots can be cut and used, sometimes spray painted gold or silver, as holiday decorations. (photo courtesy of the author)



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