**Geranium sanguineum** (bloody cranesbill)  
H: 10-18”  W: 24-36”  S: 18”  
This is a low-growing hardy geranium with round, deeply-lobed, dark green leaves that turn maroon in fall after a hard frost. Flowers are magenta - there is also a white flowering variety (‘Album’). It grows in sun or part shade, and does well in most soils, but good drainage is important to prevent crown rot. Cut back after first bloom to revitalize plant and encourage re-bloom. Another hardy geranium that makes a good ground cover is *Geranium macrorrhizum*. It is 12” tall with deep magenta flowers and pine scented foliage, and is tolerant of dry conditions and more shade than other geraniums.

**Lamium maculatum** (spotted dead nettle)  
H: 6-8”  W: 12-18”  S: 6-10”  
There are numerous cultivars with varied foliage and flower color. Most have silver-variegated foliage, and flower in shades of pink, purple, and white. They prefer full to part shade, rich moist well-drained soil, and do best in cooler conditions. They may decline in hot, dry summers, even in shady locations. A closely related plant, *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* (yellow archangel), has yellow flowers and similar variegated foliage. It has similar growing requirements, but is somewhat more tolerant of less than optimal conditions.

**Pachysandra terminalis** (Japanese spurge)  
H: 6-12”  W: 12-24+”  S: 8-12”  Pachysandra forms a tidy dense mat of evergreen foliage, with clusters of dark green shiny umbrella-shaped leaves, and white flowers in spring. It grows in full to part shade, even dense shade or under evergreens. Slow growing, it may take 3 years to fully establish, but is then long lived. Good for erosion control.

**Sedum spp.** (stonecrop)  
H: 3-12”  W: 12-24+”  S: 12-18”  There are many low growing varieties of sedum. All have fleshy leaves in various shades of green or bronze, and clusters of small star-shaped flowers in a wide range of colors. Sedums are ideal for hot, sunny, dry locations. They need no fertilizing and extra water only during severe drought. Two varieties to try are ‘Tricolor’ and ‘Dragon’s Blood’, but there are many others.

**Thymus spp.** (ornamental thyme)  
H: 1-3”  W: 18-36”  S: 8-12”  Ornamental thyme is an herb with tiny strongly scented leaves and pink or purple flowers through the summer that are attractive to bees. It needs consistent moisture until established, but then will do well in full sun in dry, poor soil. Thyme will tolerate light foot traffic and is often used along paths or between stepping stones. Creeping thyme and wooly thyme are good choices for ground covers. Wooly thyme rarely blooms but has fuzzy silver-gray appearing foliage.
Asarum europaeum) can be a specimen plant or garden ornament. They can be grated into a unified feature, or can be used in small trees, a ground cover can help integrate and other ornamental features that add interest to the landscape in all seasons of the year. Planted under a group of shrubs or small trees, a ground cover can help integrate them into a unified feature, or can accent a specimen plant or garden ornament.

Planting and Caring for Ground Cover

While ground covers require little maintenance once established, they will require some time and effort in the beginning. First, remove any turf, if necessary, make sure the area is free of weeds, and improve the soil as when starting any new planting bed. Spring is the best time to plant. If planting in the summer, be sure to keep new plants well watered. Ground cover planted in early fall may need extra protection over the first winter.

Ground cover usually looks best and fills in more evenly when planted in a staggered or diamond-shaped pattern. The number of plants required will depend on the size of the area to be covered, the mature spread of the variety, and how closely they will be spaced. Closer spacing will result in faster coverage, but is more costly and, for some plants, may result in increased maintenance or removing excess plants later.

After planting, control weeds and water regularly. A light layer of mulch will help maintain moisture and keep weeds down. Most ground covers will become established in one or two seasons. The time required to reach full coverage will depend on the plant variety and the initial spacing.

Once established, a well chosen ground cover will require little maintenance. Control weeds as needed - a thick ground cover will discourage weeds. Water during drought, and optionally fertilize lightly once or twice a year. Many ground covers benefit from an occasional pruning to neaten appearance and stimulate new growth. Avoid pruning in late summer or fall to help protect the plant over the winter.

Choosing a Ground Cover

There is a wide variety of ground cover plants available. The choice will first depend on where it will be planted. Since ground covers are often used in difficult situations, it’s very important to match the growing requirements of the plant to the conditions of the planting site. These include light and moisture available, soil quality, and competition from tree roots. This will increase the chances of success and greatly reduce maintenance.

Plant characteristics to consider include, in addition to light and moisture requirements, hardiness, mature height and spread, ability to withstand foot traffic, ornamental features, root system, life span, growth rate, maintenance required, number of plants required, and cost. When using deciduous plants there will be periods of bare ground, while evergreen plants will provide coverage throughout the year.

Another consideration is the purpose you want the ground cover to serve, whether aesthetic or practical. Available online and in books are lists of plants suitable for many different ground cover situations.

The same characteristic that makes a ground cover valuable can also become a problem in some situations. Ideally, you want a plant that will easily fill the desired space without getting out of control. The wrong plant in the wrong location can become invasive. Be cautious of plants that claim to be very fast growing under any conditions, or of plants a neighbor offers that will “grow anywhere”. If the plant can be contained by pavement or buildings, or you’re willing to make an extra effort to keep it under control, it may be worth a try. But be especially careful in any location where any ground cover might escape into woods or other natural areas. Also, never dispose of pieces of ground cover where you don’t want them to become established.

Anything that spreads can be used as ground cover. Taller plants or even spreading shrubs can be used, especially to cover larger areas. Try using herbs, ornamental grasses, mosses, or native woodland or prairie plants. Following are a few suggested plants:

**Ajuga reptans** (bogweed)

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Ajuga grows best in moist, well-drained soil in a part-shade to shady location, forming a dense mat of glossy bronze-green foliage. Cultivars are available with purple or variegated foliage - these show best color with more sun. Violet mint-like flowers create a mass of bloom in late spring and early summer. The dense foliage suppresses weeds. Water regularly during hot, dry weather. Auja grows rapidly and can be aggressive under the right conditions - pull runners to prevent establishment where it’s not wanted.

**Alchemilla mollis** (lady’s mantle)

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Lady’s mantle forms mounds of gray-green lobed leaves with wavy edges. Fine hair hold dew or raindrops and make the plant sparkle after a shower. Spikes of chartreuse flowers are held above the foliage in early summer. Lady’s mantle will grow in full sun, but appreciates light shade or afternoon shade in hot climates. Cutting the plant back after bloom will promote new growth and some rebloom, and prevent self-seeding if this is not desired.

**Asarum canadense** (Canadian wild ginger)

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A native plant, wild ginger prefers moist, rich, well-drained soil in part to full shade. It forms a mound of heart-shaped leaves with evergreen leaves, and produces purplish-brown cup-shaped flowers in late spring which are usually hidden by the foliage. Wild ginger spreads relatively slowly, has poor drought tolerance, and foliage will burn if exposed to too much sun. Though not related to culinary ginger, the roots have a similar scent and were used by early Americans as a substitute. Also available is European ginger (Asarum europaeum). This variety has a similar appearance, but is smaller and has shiny, semi-evergreen leaves.