

Ground cover: by design?

Ground cover is fashionable nowadays and the term is often used without much thought as to what is really meant by it. There seems to be some implication that it is concerned with reduction in weeding. The less bare ground there is, the less weeding one has to do. But it is not quite as simple as that.

The garden designer usually thinks of ground cover as an element in design. He will choose purple bugle or a variegated ivy because these plants produce the effect he seeks. This is excellent provided we do not get confused between design and management.

If we are to consider ground cover as an element in weed management we must first examine our weed problem. If, for instance, our weeds consist of the smaller annuals such as the happy little *Cardamine hirsuta*, or Jumping Jesus as a visitor to my garden called it last year, all we have to do is maintain a dense layer of evergreen foliage about six inches high. If however, we have an infestation of couch grass, our six-inch layer of ground cover is not only useless but it increases the problem of getting rid of the weed. It will be easier if the ground is kept bare.

Ground cover suppresses weeds mainly by intercepting light. Root competition is of minor consequence. If we have perennial weeds with substantial food reserves in their underground parts they will easily penetrate a low dense canopy. The canopy therefore has to be raised until it reaches a height beyond that which the weed can penetrate. For couch grass this is about four to five feet, but for the greater bindweed which can easily climb telephone guy wires to a height of ten feet we must look for something much higher. In fact, it may not be practicable to suppress greater bindweed by ground cover because the weed will suppress the would-be suppressor before it can get established. It is possible that a beech tree would win the battle eventually, but it would have a tough time for a few years.

The simple rule in selecting ground cover to suppress weeds is that if root systems of perennial weeds are absent we need concern ourselves only with preventing seedling weeds becoming established. As indicated above, this is not difficult with the smaller annuals but if the seedlings are perennial stinging nettles or annual or perennial thistles a very dense canopy a yard or so high is called for.

Whatever ground cover plant we choose, it will be necessary to do a good deal of hand weeding or hoeing until the ground is fully covered. If we have chosen wisely and managed it carefully in the early stages we may finish up with a greatly reduced labour requirement.

There is, however, another possible snag. Some of our more vigorous ground cover plants may prove to be worse weeds than the weeds they

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have suppressed. *Hypericum calycinum* can be quite a tough removal job and the yellow dead nettle which keeps changing its Latin name — it is now *Lamiastrum luteum* — although easily removed — is very rampant and can advance in a four ft. radius a year. In fact, vigour and ease of eradication are important points to consider when choosing ground cover plants.

If few weeds, and then only small ones, have to be suppressed *Cotula squalida* and *Acaena microphylla*,

each about one inch high, will probably cope and they introduce new possibilities in design. The first has bronze purple foliage and the latter rather a dull green. *Tiarella cordifolia* with yellowish green leaves and plumes of creamy white flowers in spring is a lovely plant for light shade. The form I grow has chocolate brown veins. It will suppress small seedling weeds. More rampant but also attractive is the Indian strawberry *Fragaria indica* with yellow flowers and bright red strawberries as big as cherries standing bolt upright like drumsticks. The flavour is disappointing.

From time to time in future articles we will consider the special merits of other ground cover plants.

Tiarella Cordifolia in winter

