

More ground cover

By R. W. Sidwell

It is almost a year since I wrote on ground cover in these pages. In that article, an introduction to this complex subject, I tried to explain the principles involved in plant competition and why attempts to use ground cover as a labour-saving technique can sometimes be disappointing.

The essential thing to bear in mind is that each situation is unique and generalisations are dangerous. The idea of using a vigorous plant to suppress the growth of a less vigorous one might seem simple enough but variations in soil texture, moisture regime, light and other factors can create differential growth responses which may lead to the weed winning the day.

A fairly simple rule is that the ground cover plant, which we may call the suppressor, should produce a dense canopy above the level of the weed plant, which we hope will become the suppressed. The height needed for this depends on the nature of the weed material present. The establishment of small annual weeds is easily prevented by a dense canopy a few inches high. Perennial weed root systems may be very difficult to suppress. It will be far better to spend some time removing perennial weeds, either mechanically or chemically, before planting the ground at all.

While the most rampageous of ground coverers may suppress most weeds, they may become little better than weeds themselves, and once large areas become covered with single species and garden becomes less interesting. Variety increases interest.

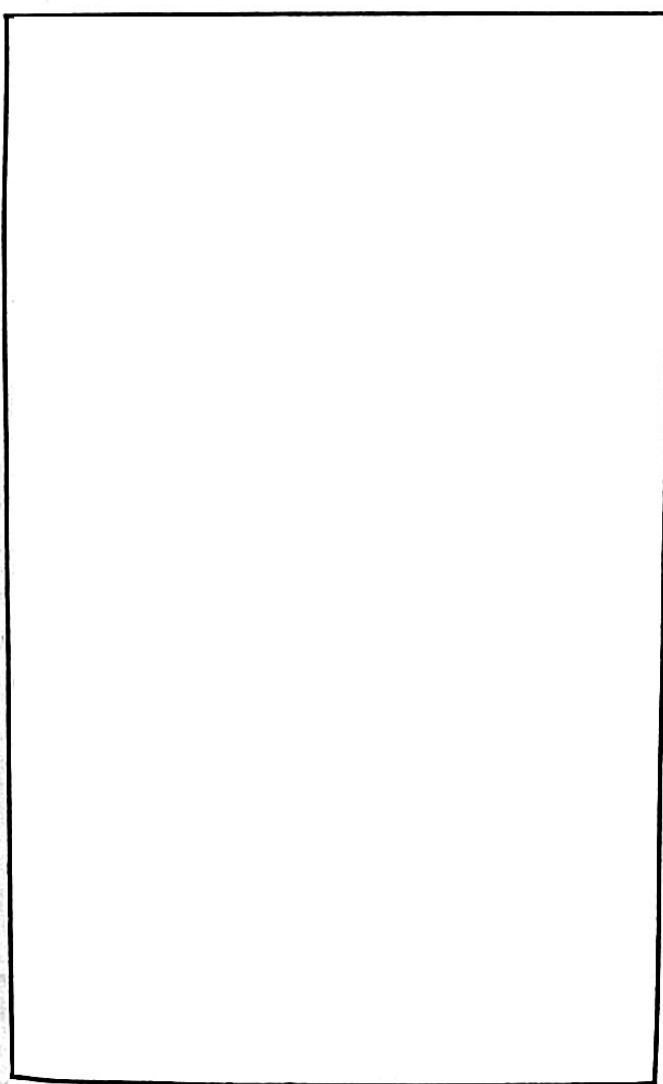
If we are to maintain this variety, especially in a small garden, no one kind of plant must get too large. This means that small, dense, clump-forming plants will serve our purpose better than *Vinca major* or *Hypericum calycinum*. The types of plant I have in mind are heucherus, *Alchemilla mollis*, *Pulmonaria saccharata* and *Tellima grandiflora*, especially the form with purple winter foliage.

Many of the vigorous "rock plants" as distinct from the difficult "alpines" come into the category of the more refined ground cover, Aubrieta, arabis, mossy saxifrages, dwarf sedums, *Phlox subulata* and *P. douglasii* come to mind as excellent plants of this kind. These are all sun lovers.

For shady situations we need not be limited to ivies and periwinkles. If

it is not too dry *Mitella breweri* is a delightful little clump-forming evergreen. The leaves, somewhat like little oak leaves, form a dense dome a few inches high, surmounted by rigid spikes of green flowers much loved by those doing miniature flower arrangements. Quite often, dense foliage during the summer is sufficient to prevent seedling weed establishment. Hostas are particularly good in shade although their foliage is absent for six months of the year. The solidity of their rootstock is as effective as a leaf canopy.

With all of these plants some "gardening" has to be done to achieve perfect results. I repeat what I said above about the need to remove the more difficult perennial weeds before planting. Hoeing and hand weeding will then be necessary until little or no bare ground remains. After that, a little tidying-up occasionally is all that is called for. And I can hear some old gardeners saying "What is new about this?" The answer is that there is nothing new about it but the value of the reduced labour requirement is now appreciated more than it once was.



Mitella Brewerii, a close non-invasive ground coverer for a shady spot.