

## Groundcovers

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There are good reasons to use a groundcover instead of lawn grass. Among the issues are that if you select the right groundcovers, they are more shade tolerant than any of our lawn grasses. Groundcovers require less care such as mowing, and they are less likely to be bothered by insects and diseases. One of the main advantages of using a groundcover rather than lawn grass is that it can save lots of water if you want a green lawn area all summer.

The most common groundcover is Asiatic jasmine. It has shiny evergreen foliage and can be grown at any level between 4 inches and 18 inches tall. With the use of a string mower or lawn mower once or twice per year the plantings can be managed with manicured shapes and surfaces. The plant does well in sun or shade, but it is most often used to replace St Augustine grass on sites where it has become too shady for the grass to prosper. Most plantings are not irrigated or are only watered several times per summer.

One issue with Asiatic jasmine is that it is relatively slow to become established. It works well to place jasmine from one gallon or 4-inch pots on 18-inch centers into killed St Augustine grass or a prepared planting bed. The sod killed with Round-up serves well as a mulch to reduce weed pressures as the jasmine spreads. It is inexpensive to use 2-inch rooted cuttings, but they will not fill in the plant area for at least 2 growing seasons.

Dwarf Ruellia is another groundcover that is shade tolerant. The pointed leaves radiate off a central area to form plants about 14 inches around and 12 inches tall. It also has blooms that attract the pollinators such as butterflies and hummingbirds. Blue or pink flowers are most common but there is also white. The more sun it gets the more it blooms. Dwarf Ruellia is also called dwarf Mexican petunia. Placing the transplants on 24-inch centers works well.

As desirable as Dwarf Mexican Ruellia is in producing a solid ground covering without taking over the neighborhood, be wary of its full size relative, the Mexican petunia, it will spread far and wide by the seed it produces.

There are several versions of monkey grass (mondo grass) and liriopse that make attractive groundcovers for shaded landscapes. They are clumping grass- like plants that range in size from 2 inches tall (dwarf mondo grass) to 18 inches tall. They can be planted in masses of the same size or in waves or layers of the different sizes. They are slower to fill in than dwarf ruellia but once they fill in, they make a very dense groundcover that requires little attention. In some climates the liriopes and monkey grasses can survive in full sun, but not here in San Antonio, plant them in shade only.

For full sun consider spreading rosemary as a groundcover. The foliage has an interesting texture and the plants spread to cover at least two feet in diameter. They only grow to about one foot deep and do not require any mowing or pruning. They are especially attractive when they spill over a ledge or grow on a slope. The planting bed can be dry, but it needs to be well-drained. Deer do not eat rosemary.

Most gardeners when they think of iris think of the blooms, they produce every spring. The flowers are attractive but cemetery and blue flag iris also make an effective, unusual groundcover. The sword like,

upright leaf blades are very distinctive. The cemetery and blue flag iris leaves are especially compact and easy to manage. They will survive as a groundcover in light shade but if you want the attractive blooms, they do best in the sun. It is not always easy to find cemetery iris at retail nurseries but if you put the word out with the SA Men's Garden Club or Master Gardeners, there are usually a large number of rhizomes available in the summer and fall as beds are thinned out. Plant the rhizomes so that the top is level with the soil surface. Iris are very drought tolerant but cannot survive soggy soil. Deer do not eat iris.

If you are a SAWS customer check out the Coupon Program on their website. The program may be used to pay some of the costs of a conversion from lawn grass to drought tolerant groundcover.