

CLOCKWISE from top left: Cyclamen hederifolium "Bidens", Euphorbia amygdaloides robbiae, Haloragis erecta, "Wellington Bronze", Thymus vulgaris.



Ground covers

SO OFTEN WHEN CREATING A GARDEN THAT MAY BE LARGE OR SMALL, WE SELECT A FEW TREES AND A COLLECTION OF SHRUBS, THEN RUSH HOME AND PLANT EVERYTHING TO MAKE OUR GARDEN. WHEN ALL THESE PLANTS GROW IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT SOMETHING IS MISSING.

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It is the ground hugging, clumping plants that give a garden scale and interest on the ground level that may have been omitted. These are the plants that help to visually anchor the garden to the earth.

Calculated planting of different sizes and growth habits usually creates scale and the illusion of depth in a garden. Ground covers perform a multitude of tasks in addition to helping to create a tiering effect in a garden. These plants suppress weeds, help keep soil cool in summer and can if chosen well, provide colour and textural interest. If placed well they soften off hard edges to paths, paved areas and even lawns making the man made garden look more natural and visually softer.

Many of these plants self layer or multiply in a clumping style and colonise an area effectively.

In areas of dry shade in a garden, hellebores are very effective, giving a great show of flowers in winter when things can be a bit drab, they are very rewarding. They do die down in mid-summer and you may want to remove spent leaves but with the huge selection of varieties available now in a large range of colour, these plants are well worth considering. They do look best on mass, so plant six together rather than one on its own.

Cyclamen hederifolium, miniature cyclamen, are also very effective in forming a carpet of leaves in dry shady areas, they grow from a corm and are dormant in summer, coming into flower in autumn and leaf through to mid winter. They look delicate but are really tough little plants, multiplying from seed easily. If you plant 10 corms under a tree you will soon have a carpet of patterned leaves and hundreds of sweet little flowers. These plants really look fantastic when mass planted.

Bidens is a creeping ground cover that thrives in full sun or semi shade and rewards with bright yellow small flowers. Its leaves are a mid green and quite fine but the overall effect of this plant is a dense mass of leaves covered in bright yellow flowers. It layers readily so can be divided and moved to other parts of the garden. It's a tough little plant that will spread to one metre square, layering on its own.

Euphorbia amygdaloides robbiae is a lovely little rosette leaved plant that forms a clump quite easily. It isn't invasive but does spread over an area of up to one metre over time. It has green, yellow flowers that stand up above the leaves in winter and spring. This plant is tough and handles sun, shade and frost easily. It does better in soil with some moisture and looks its best in morning sun or semi shade.

Haloragis erecta, "Wellington Bronze" is a wonderful clumping plant that has dark bronze leaves and can grow up to 40cm high. It is a great foliage plant that will cover difficult areas easily, not needing much water. It grows in the shade but is less colourful without light. This plant does seed easily and will cover an area of up to one square metre. It will give you excellent foliage and colour contrast, and only needs the occasional clip to keep it fresh.

Thymus vulgaris, creeping thyme, and what a delightful plant this is, with a ground hugging growth habit and small grey green leaves, it thrives in full sun and is drought tolerant. It will give off a lovely scent if trodden on or brushed passed, so best at the edge of a path. It self layers so is easily divided and creates a wonderful mass planting.

A selection of these plants will give any garden added interest and will soften hard edges. Choose well and you won't need to worry about water or weeding.

You will be amazed by the difference a few ground covers can make.