

## Ground Covers - Alternatives to Grass

By Luis Llenza

Ground covers solve a multitude of garden problems, especially in those areas where grass serves no practical purpose or is difficult to grow. You can define boundaries, highlight flowerbeds, discourage foot traffic, conceal unsightly tree roots and reduce maintenance with ground cover. For dramatic effect, use varieties of ground cover to inject color, texture and shape into your landscape. Let's look at some examples.

Create boundaries or barriers to foot traffic with Bromeliads, Foxtail Ferns (*Asparagus densiflorus* 'Myers') Swordferns (*Nephrolepis cordifolia*) and Macho Ferns (*Nephrolepis falcata*). Hide damaged spots, including those created by neighborhood pets, with Asparagus Ferns (*Asparagus densiflorus* 'Sprengerii'). For areas where grass won't grow, consider Macho Ferns (*Nephrolepis falcata*), some Bromeliads, Mondo Grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*), and Artillery Ferns (*Pilea microphylla*). In a contained space, Wandering Jew (*Tradescantia zebrina*) is a good choice.

Ground covers can create instant color in sunny spots. Oyster Plants (*Rhoeo discolor*), Sweet Potato Vines (*Ipomea batatas* 'Blackie') and Wedelia (*Wedelia trilobata*) work well in large areas. Ideal smaller scale choices include the bold hues of Bromeliad *Aechmea*, Bromeliad *Neoregelia* 'fireball' and the succulent *Bulbine frutescens* 'Hallmark'. If you have a Banyan Tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) or Umbrella Tree (*Schefflera actinophylla*), and you wish to hide their exposed roots, try Macho Ferns (*Nephrolepis falcata*) or Pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*), available in green or white.

To maintain balance in the overall design, ground covers on one side of your landscape should be repeated on the other side. For best results, select the right plants for the right places. For example, Evergreen Giant Liriope (*Liriope muscari*) and Swordferns (*Nephrolepis cordifolia*) work well in sunny areas, while Spanish Shawl (*Heterocentron elegans*), and Artillery Ferns (*Pilea microphylla*) will thrive in shady areas. Both sun and shade suit two additional specimens: Snake Plant, (*Sansiveria trifasciata* 'Golden Hahnii'), also known as Mother-in-law's Tongue, and Philodendron 'Burle Marx'.

Create landscape drama by highlighting a planting area with ground cover in a contrasting color. Dark varieties provide a good backdrop for flowers; variegated color patterns bring light to dark areas; and monochromatic greens emphasize the form, depth and textures of your garden plantings. Use ground cover to replace grass in difficult areas such as strips of ground between sidewalks and drives. The University of Florida's Cooperative Extension Service offers two articles of interest: "Enviroscaping to Conserve Energy: Ground Covers for South Florida", A.W. Meerow and R. J. Black, and "Ground Covers for Florida Homes", Robert J. Black.