



Department of Agriculture

# Gardennote

## Groundcovers – the good and the bad

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Groundcovers are like a living mulch in terms of the useful roles they serve in the garden. They protect the soil surface from the sun's heat, reduce evaporation, prevent wind erosion and suppress weeds.

However, many groundcovers compete with other plants, stray into areas of the garden where you do not want them and, in some cases, jump the fence and invade natural habitats.

Some are extremely difficult to remove once they reach problematic proportions so it is worth considering, before planting, whether you have room for a particular groundcover and whether you have the means – and dedication – to keep it under control.

Many groundcovers are prostrate perennials that form either a mat or multiple clumps, spreading by means of above-ground stolons or underground rhizomes. Some prostrate shrubs are also classed as groundcovers, and some climbers will grow vigorously across the ground if there is no vertical support for them to grow up.

### Anticipating the spread

When buying a groundcover, read the label and take note of the height and width that it is expected to reach – and then be prepared for it to exceed those dimensions, especially in optimum conditions. Be wary if the label describes a species as having “indefinite” spread. Avoid accepting cuttings from friends or neighbours who say that this particular plant gives rapid coverage. Do not order seeds from overseas, or seeds and plants from other States in Australia, or the internet, as you might inadvertently bring in a weedy species that could pollute natural habitats in Western Australia.

### Highly invasive groundcovers

Seaside daisy (*Erigeron karvinskianis*) – also known as shore daisy and wall daisy - not only spreads fast laterally but also works its way up into shrubs and can form smothering mounds. Stems take root every



*Seaside daisy is capable of smothering other ornamentals.*

few centimetres as they grow, and seeds germinate throughout the garden, including cracks in paths and driveways. If you want to grow it, do so in a clearly contained bed and keep an eye open for seedlings appearing elsewhere.

Wandering Jew (*Tradescantia fluminensis*) tolerates sun, shade and drought and is able to take over any part of the garden. Stems grow several metres a year and develop into mats 60cm deep. As its fleshy leaves feel

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cool in summer, dogs are tempted to lie on this plant which can trigger allergic reactions, especially on soft belly skin.

The above plant has white flowers but an almost identical plant – also commonly called wandering Jew – is *Commelina benghalensis*, which has blue flowers. In the garden, its invasive habits are similar to those of *T. fluminensis*.



*Commelina benghalensis* forms thick, unattractive mats, growing several metres a year.

Asparagus fern (*Asparagus sprengeri*), which has sparse prickles on the stems, forms low dense thickets and produces berries whose seeds not only germinate where the fruits drop but also further afield after being eaten by birds. The ground where it grows becomes closely packed with tubers that form a mattress-like layer, preventing water from being absorbed.

Lippia (*Phyla nodiflora*) in the past has been recommended as a lawn substitute but it runs rampant, especially if over-watered. A close relative, *P. canescens*, is a pasture and wetland weed in eastern Australia, but is sometimes still sold in Western Australia.

Other groundcovers that can become a big problem in the garden include English ivy (*Hedera helix*), fishbone fern (*Nephrolepis cordifolia*), creeping boobialla (*Myoporum parvifolium*) and galenia (*Galenia pubescens*). Those that have the capacity to become environmental weeds as well include periwinkle (*Vinca major* and *V. minor*), nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*), Singapore daisy (*Sphagneticola trilobata*), gazania (*Gazania* spp) and arctotis (*Arctotis stoechadifolia*).



Fishbone fern.



Nasturtium.



Here, allysum and gazanias have self-seeded from the garden above onto the weedy verge below, from where it is a short step for them to invade bushland.

### Groundcovers that should be monitored

Some groundcovers are not such serious nuisances as the above, but it is wise to watch their progress so that you keep them just where you want them.

Dichondra (*Dichondra repens*) is often recommended as a lawn substitute and is effective as such, but only as an ornamental lawn since it does not tolerate being walked on. What you must be vigilant for is dichondra creeping into a grass lawn, as its stems are so fine and fragile that you cannot pick them all out, and pieces left behind will regenerate. The same problem arises if dichondra makes its way between bricks in paths.



Dichondra is a neat little groundcover, but watch out for its tendency to grow between bricks, where it can be very hard to remove.

Spider plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*) develops long arching stems with plantlets at the end that take root if they touch soil. Progress is rapid along reticulation lines, and when you pull plants out, root fragments remain. Ideal places to grow spider plant are hanging baskets or confined, raised beds where the plantlets can hang in mid-air.

Alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*) self-seeds prolifically. This is not too much of a problem in a garden, as seedlings are easily pulled out. However, watch out for alyssum appearing on your road verge, because from there it can seed itself further and further away, which has led to it becoming an environmental weed in some coastal areas.

Native violet (*Viola hederacea*) is very vigorous once it is well established, so monitor its spread. In particular it becomes a problem if it has access to damp ground.

Heartleaf iceplant (*Aptenia cordifolia*) is a useful groundcover, especially for binding a loose soil surface. However, it often harbours snails which are attracted to the cool, damp shade beneath its dense mat of stems.



Heartleaf iceplant.

### More easily controlled groundcovers

Fortunately there are plenty of groundcovers that, with a little maintenance, behave themselves well.

Bacopa (*Sutera cordifolium*) is suitable for shady parts of the garden. Although it grows rapidly, it does not overwhelm other plants and the weak stems are easy to pull out if necessary.



Bacopa is suitable for shady parts of the garden.

Lemon-scented thyme (*Thymus citriodorus*) is a pleasant choice for covering bare ground around stepping stones in a path, because the tiny leaves release fragrance as your feet brush against them.

Many Australian plants make good, controllable groundcovers – for example, snake vine (*Hibbertia scandens*), fairy fan flower (*Scaevola aemula*), Sturt's desert pea (*Swainsona formosa*), running postman (*Kennedia prostrata*), creeping banksias (*Banksia petiolaris* and *B. repens*) and the compact little cultivar *Banksia* 'Birthday Candles'.

Prickly groundcovers, such as snake bush (*Hemiandra pungens*) and some prostrate grevilleas can be useful in certain circumstances – for example, when planted around a pond they prevent cats reaching fish or frogs.

Many larger leafed plants which are not strictly confined to the groundcover category can still suit the purpose under tall shrubs or trees – for example, groups of agapanthus or dwarf gardenia, or ivy-leaf pelargonium which does just as well when lying loosely on the ground as it does when climbing up through trellis.

Even the best groundcovers can become unruly if neglected, so a light pruning in spring and autumn is recommended to encourage compact growth and increase flowering. Do not let groundcovers grow right up against the bases or trunks of shrubs and trees.

## Getting rid of nuisance groundcovers

If you decide that a certain groundcover is defying your best attempts at maintenance, getting rid of it is obviously the solution – but this can be hard.

Spraying with herbicide is not practicable if the unwanted groundcover is growing beneath or around plants that you wish to retain. With insidious groundcovers such as periwinkle and ivy, however, spraying may be the only option.

Dig out all the shrubs and herbaceous perennials that you want to keep, and do not cut the groundcovers back before spraying because the herbicide will work more effectively if there is plenty of leaf surface. Always read the label and follow the directions. Avoid spraying on a windy day when drift could reach other plants.

Groundcovers like lippia, seaside daisy and wandering Jew can be pulled out, but any fragment of stem or root that you miss will sprout anew, so you will have to repeat the procedure many times before you succeed. Asparagus fern when uprooted will leave the ground full of tubers, so you might have to consider taking out the top soil.

Never dump any plant material in bushland. If you pull out groundcovers, put them into plastic bags, tie and bin them. Alternatively, if you take them to a waste tip, transport them in a covered trailer so that seeds and cuttings cannot fall onto the roadside and grow.