



As soon as the snow melts, you know what we will get – lovely shades of brown. Looking around at all of that brown will make even the diehard gardeners long for any other color. You will be looking at those spots that have been annoyingly empty of interest – probably an area that has been difficult to get plantings to survive. Have you tried groundcovers? By nature these are used to – get ready for this revelation – cover the ground. This is one of those times to consider invasiveness a bonus. So – what's out there to try? Yes, there's *Pachysandra* and *Vinca* and *Euonymus* and *Hedera*. But, let's look at a few options as there are many that are often overlooked for our area, but should be seriously considered.

*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* or bearberry is a very tolerant plant – conditions of any kind do not bother this plant, it seems to love salt, and while most are seen growing in acidic areas other plantings have done very well in limestone soils. This short, shrubby evergreen can spread to about 15' per plant, yet it only gets to be about a foot tall. The leaf color holds beautifully throughout the growing season, turning a nice bronze color in fall staying that way until the spring greening. As an added bonus, this plant produces pretty pink flowers that hold through most of the late spring months. The eventual result is red stone fruits in late summer, persisting through winter to serve as a good source of wildlife food. This one does not require much maintenance.

*Cornus canadensis* or bunchberry is another overlooked deciduous native groundcover. One of the toughest requirements for growing this beauty is an acidic soil - but this one is worth the effort of pH amendments. It has lovely dark green leaves, whorled in groups of four to six, emerging from a low woody stem in spring. Flowers will follow leaf emergence sometime in late spring. The greenish flowers themselves are not particularly showy but the surrounding four to six white bracts make a lovely showing, especially en masse. The persistent clustered, red fruits in late summer provide excellent food for wildlife and are followed by nice fall foliage coloring in a showy, dark red.

If you like the look of grass but don't want the hassle of mowing – this may be the groundcover for you. *Liriope spicata* or creeping lily-turf, gives the appearance of a taller (12" – 18"), softly flowing, tufted grass. After dying back for the winter, new narrow blades shoot through the ground, greening up early in the spring. A nice lavender flower spike emerges late in the summer, followed by blackish fruits that will persist through winter. This plant has a high tolerance for heat and humidity during the summer months and will grow in full sun to shade. Do not confuse this one with *Liriope muscari* – which is not perennial in the northern climates.

*Paxistima canbyi* or Canby Paxistima is an evergreen shrub that reaches only about 12" in height but can spread in width to about five feet. The selling factor of this plant is the overall condition tolerance and low maintenance. This is one tough groundcover – no real care is needed beyond the initial establishment. It has shown no serious dieback even in very cold winter conditions, tolerates high pH soils, will grow in full sun or partial shade. And, although the small, red flowers and white fruits are not very impressive, the dark green leaves are followed by a bronze coloring in the fall that provide nice multi-season interest.

*Rhus aromatica* 'Gro-low' or grow low sumac is a deciduous shrub that has been around for a while and yet - is not often used as a groundcover in the home landscape. This is a lovely low grower that will only get to about two feet tall and four feet wide. The grayish blue-green, rounded foliage produces a bright fall color show with an additional nice foliage scent persisting throughout the growing season. This plant is very tolerant of adverse conditions – but will tolerate dry soils better than wet feet. It grows in full sun to almost full shade with limited maintenance. If you feel the need to prune - it can be done at the ground level for the ultimate in rejuvenation. Yes, it will come back just fine.

*Salix repens* or creeping willow has been seen a bit more in the past few years but – seriously, this is not a plant for the faint of heart or small of space. Willows grow, fast. This one will infiltrate hillsides as it spreads via fast growing underground stems. The tips of these stems will shoot upward out of the ground and extend to about three feet in height. The coloring on the leaves will vary according to cultivar selected but will often have a grayish white cast. Willows do the job – but do understand what that job is and choose wisely with regard to this one.

*Waldsteinia fragarioides* or barren strawberry – don't get your hopes up – BARREN strawberry. While it has pretty strawberry plant form and nice flowers, it does not produce edible berries. The evergreen, trifoliate leaves are a nice glossy green throughout the growing season and are termed evergreen, but "green" is a bit of a color overstatement for our cold climate winters. And although not really green during the winter, the leaves do stay put and green up early in the spring. The yellow flowers provide a rather quiet show, emerging in the late spring although somewhat hidden by the foliage - something of a treat to look for in the garden. These plants will form a nice thick groundcover over a few years which can be helped along by propagation from seed or division. Growing conditions are rather flexible – pH around neutral, full sun to partial shade, they like cool root zones so mulching is a good idea.