

# Super-Tough Groundcovers

Sometime you just have an area that needs *something* by way of planting, but you don't want to invest too much time in the upkeep after you've planted it. Here are a few (almost) bullet-proof options that take very little care once established. Please note, even the toughest groundcovers need a little TLC for the first season after being planted, so keep new transplants slightly moist until well rooted-in.

## **Bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*)**

Bugleweed is a low growing (3"-6"), spreading semi-evergreen perennial. It is extremely cold hardy and adapts well to clay soils. It grows densely enough for the bronze-burgundy leaves to control weeds where it becomes well established. *Ajuga* is an option where grass will not establish due to shady conditions as it tolerates moderate foot traffic. Watch when located adjacent to lawn areas, as it can spread vigorously into grass.

Bugleweed prefers semi-shade to shade, though if the soil is moist enough it can tolerate a fair bit of sun. Keep slightly moist after planting until well established, after that it is moderately drought tolerant (supplemental water needed in extended drought conditions). Plants should be spaced approximately 12" apart.

Rabbits and deer do not generally eat Bugleweed, and it can be grown under black walnut trees. This groundcover may be mowed or trimmed after the beautiful blue flowers have faded in spring to keep it tidy, but it's not necessary to do so.

Leaf shapes, sizes and colors vary between varieties, from the small brownish leaves of 'Chocolate Chip' to the larger burgundy leaves of 'Caitlin's Giant'. 'Burgundy Glow' has tricolor leaves of pink, bronze-green and white.

## **Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea')**

Creeping Jenny forms very low (3") mats of chartreuse to gold foliage, with the brightest color  
*(Continued on page 2)*

NEW GARDEN  
LANDSCAPING & NURSERY

newgarden.com  
email:info@newgarden.com

**New Garden Gazebo**  
3811 Lawndale Dr.  
Greensboro, NC 27455  
phone: 336-288-8893



# Super-Tough Groundcovers cont.

*(Continued from page 1)*

developing in sunnier locations. Like Bugleweed, Creeping Jenny prefers semi-shade, but will grow in sun (with enough moisture) to full shade. Moist to average soils are best, as Jenny is not extremely drought tolerant. A vigorous groundcover, it can become somewhat aggressive when in its ideal conditions. It's a great choice for areas that occasionally become wet with standing water after rains as it is very tolerant of wet soils. Creeping Jenny looks especially nice cascading over walls or rocks or in containers.

Creeping Jenny is very disease and pest resistant and low maintenance. The golden color complements purple, burgundy, and blue-grey leafed plants nicely. Bright yellow flowers in spring sometimes go unnoticed as they are so similar in color to the leaves. Space plants 12-18" when planted.

## **English Ivy (*Hedera helix*)**

Ivy is one of the toughest, hardiest groundcovers available. Adaptable to almost any condition but dry full sun, it has saved many an "unplantable" area. It can become invasive, especially when seeds are dispersed far and wide by birds. This can be controlled somewhat by not permitting it to climb trees, fence posts or walls, as ivy only flowers when it climbs (While ivy does not steal nutrients from trees, it can shade the tree's leaves from needed sunlight, and if it gets too dense in a tree, can add so much weight that the tree may break in high winds or ice storms). Ivy kept from climbing generally stays under 12" tall.

Although there are thousands of ivy cultivars, the most commonly used for groundcover are the "plain" green-leafed and white- or golden-variegated varieties. The variegated types are slightly less vigorous. All ivies are deer and rabbit resistant.

Except for controlling its spread, ivy is nearly maintenance free, and pest and disease resistant. Plant 3" or 4" pots 12"-18" apart.

*(Continued on page 3)*



# Super-Tough Groundcovers cont.

(Continued from page 2)

## **Lilyturf (*Liriope spicata* & *Liriope muscari*)**

The two species of Liriope have very different habits, and must be chosen correctly for results you want. *Liriope spicata* spreads and is a better choice for filling in larger areas. *Liriope muscari* forms clumps and is ideal for borders and edging. Both are semi-evergreen and prefer semi-shade, though most varieties will tolerate full shade to sun (some varieties may burn in full sun without afternoon shade) and are very drought tolerant once established. All types are deer and rabbit resistant.

*Liriope spicata* is available in blue or white flowered varieties and has medium green leaves. *Liriope muscari* is available in green-leaved or variegated varieties. The flowers of Liriope are very attractive, with those of *L. muscari* being showier. Both species can form black berries in fall. Maintenance is simple as they only need to be cut back or mowed high in spring before new leaves begin to grow when the foliage becomes unattractive. Plant *Liriope muscari* 18" apart, and up to 24" if distinct clumps are desired. Plant *Liriope spicata* 15-18" apart.

## **Mondo Grass, Monkey Grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*)**

Not actually a grass, Mondo is actually a member of the lily family. It makes a dense groundcover that keeps weeds from establishing but does not spread too aggressively and stays 8-12" high. It's particularly nice as an edging. Mondo is tolerant of clay soils and shade to part shade. It may need supplemental water during periods of drought. Space 6-12" inches apart, depending on how quickly you need full coverage.

Maintenance is minimal: if plants get ragged-looking, shear or mow on high setting in early spring before new growth begins to refresh the foliage.

The black-leaved form of Mondo grass, *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens' is much slower growing, and is more suited as a specimen plant rather than a groundcover. Mini-mondo grows to only 4" and makes a beautiful groundcover, especially in smaller areas.

(Continued on page 4)



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# Super-Tough Groundcovers cont.

(Continued from page 3)

## **Pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*)**

Pachysandra is almost as tough as English ivy. It's ideal for dry shade under trees that have difficulty growing anything else. Once your transplants are established it spreads rapidly to form a shiny green carpet. Pachysandra is not a good choice for areas that receive a lot of sun or have soil that stays soggy. Pachysandra is deer and rabbit resistant.

Most pachysandra available is green-leafed, but a variegated variety is available. There is also a pachysandra (*P. procumbens*) that is native to North Carolina which is slightly slower growing and has matte, grey-green leaves as opposed to the shiny leaves of common pachysandra, but is otherwise very similar. Plant either type 6-12" apart when installing.

## **Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*)**

Tougher than its fine texture and spring flowers would indicate, periwinkle is an evergreen groundcover ideal for part shade. Periwinkle will grow in full shade but may appear thin or sparse and may not flower well. Amend soil with organic material for best results, as periwinkle prefers moist, well-drained, humusy soil. It is very low growing, staying under 6" and spreads quickly by rooting at the stem nodes. It can become invasive, especially into lawns. The bright-yellow variegated 'Illumination' has beautiful leaf color, but a slower growth habit. Periwinkle is deer and rabbit resistant.

Flowers can range from white to deep grape-purple, depending on cultivar, and appear in spring and sporadically through summer and fall. Plant 12" apart when installing.



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