

# Bird's eye view of ground cover

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
Los Angeles Times

Ground cover.  
The sheer bluntness of the American name only reinforces the lowly status of the class of plants below trees, below shrubs, below borders, below even lawn. But sometimes the most impressive plants in the garden are beneath our gaze, tucked along a path, running under a tree. Ground covers not only are appearing in ever more tantalizing variety, they also are useful in every garden. They keep down dirt, control weeds and hold earth in place. Choose the right one and it can serve as visual glue and provide color, texture, variety, beneficial insects, scent and even cut flowers. Select the wrong one and you can become embroiled in a battle to either keep it alive or contain it. The No. 1 American ground cover, of course, is lawn. But pity the fool who kills its ground cover. Centuries ago, landscapers managed to transcend the term by concertedly mimicking the manicured estates of England. The rituals of lawn care now so defined American gardening that one of the warmest recommendations a nurseryman will give a ground cover is "You can mow it."

With mowability a virtue by proxy, one of the most popular ground covers in Southern Californian nurseries is the South African import *Dymondia margaretae*. This silvery plant grows in a bed of tightly woven roots and leaves, similar to lawn except glittery. In the summer, it produces yellow flowers, which skulk so low that most would escape a high-set mower blade. A bed of *Dymondia* is a strong and beautiful thing to behold. It's not so fast-growing that it takes over. But you wouldn't want to lie down in it either. It could get scratchy. *Dymondia* comes into its own as transition planting on parkways, creating segues from grass to gravel. In this context, it's the height of conservationist chic.

You can mow oregano too, says V.J. Billings. Twenty years ago, she founded Mountain Valley Growers, a Fresno herb farm that has made considerable inroads selling herbs as landscaping plants by mail order. It sells half a dozen creeping, crawling and mounding oreganos suitable for ground cover and no fewer than 18 ornamental thymes. Groupings of herbs make beautiful beds, but it's hard to call them ground cover rather than bedding plants. They do meet the definition when they are planted along pathways and steps, and when they tumble elegantly here and there. The best are scented and bruise fragrantly underfoot. For Billings, the truest characteristic of a ground cover is the ability to spread. Creeping capability can be assessed at a glance, she says. Look for leggy shows of stem. A vigorous creeper will need to flop, touching its stem to the ground, where it can send down new roots. The more vigorous a creeper, the more space it will have between its leaves, so the foliage doesn't get in the way of the flopping, grounding and rooting. As a working rule, the closer set the leaves, the slower a plant will creep; the farther apart, the faster. Understand this and all sorts of things start to become clear, such as why two of California's best-known ground covers, Wandering Jew (*Tradescantia albiflora* and *Tradescantia fluminensis*) and Periwinkle (*Vinca*), are famous across the rest of the country as trailing plants

for hanging baskets. They're trying to reach the floor. The more vigorous a creeper, the harder the job we give it. If you have a non-irrigated hillside, gazanias and *Osteospermum* may be your plants. Both trailers do so much to stabilize soil climbing from highway verges that they are more commonly known as "free-way daisies." But from the car, it's hard to appreciate that these South African imports are quietly wondrous for another reason. Gazanias withstand a constant diet of heat, grit, smog and noise but still gracefully open their flowers every day at dawn and shut them at dusk. A lesser-known and simply gorgeous creeper is the Uruguayan import *Dicliptera suberecta*. For most of the year, it provides a foot-high stand of soft, largely pest-free velvety gray-green foliage. As it grows, the weight of the branches forces the limbs to the ground, where they put out new roots. Every June, it produces a rich head of tubular orange blossoms and is soon staked out by clicking hummingbirds. It's forgiving of trampling, tolerant of shade and reasonably drought-resistant. The toughest but most stunning creepers must be the succulents, usually lumped together as "ice-plants." Their sculptural, cool leaves produce flowers so wacky they seem fake. Over-watering is so bad for them that they are best planted out of reach of irrigation. When they get too dusty, shower them with a hose. They deserve it. They make superb, fire-resistant erosion control, but you will still need to choose small-leaved varieties or create wash channels so sudden rains won't waterlog them.

Los Angeles Times photo by Brian Vander Brug  
**Clockwise from top right: *Dicliptera suberecta* is a favorite of hummingbirds. The shade-loving *Vinca major* takes root as it spreads. The leaves of *Trifolium repens* 'Dark Dancer' are nearly black.**



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