

Ground Covers

for Shaded Landscapes in North Georgia

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Two common problems many North Georgia landowners face are trying to establish landscapes in shaded areas in this forested part of the state and covering sloped areas with plants to reduce erosion. North Georgia's climate can be variable, with temperatures dropping into the single digits during extreme winters. Areas susceptible to deep freeze typically are found in Georgia's USDA plant hardiness zones 6 and 7 (Figure 1). It can be difficult to make proper plant selections in these regions with subfreezing temperatures and low-light conditions. For these reasons this circular will cover the most common ground covers, including native and non-native plants that have a long history of survival under these conditions.

Understanding the basics: Shade, maintenance, and wildlife

Shade can come in many forms: morning shade, afternoon shade, dappled sunlight, deep shade, etc. In addition to shade, considerations such as soil types, structure, and drainage (well-drained, moist, clay, wet, upland) also play important roles in decision-making within that shaded location. Most plant labels refer to sunlight and desired water availability, therefore the plants listed here will mention soil-wetness preference.

It is important to understand the type of shade in your landscape so that you can select a well-adapted plant. These recommended plants will assume a moderate (less than 3 hr of sun) to full-shade (no sun) scenario.

Most ground covers do exactly what the name implies—cover the ground. For that reason, these plants also can spread beyond the boundaries of where we want them to grow. Regular maintenance usually is needed to control the edges of the desired areas through mechanical means (i.e., pulling, mowing). It often is no surprise to learn that many ground covers are considered aggressive or even invasive plants. No plant in this document is listed in categories 1 or 2 of exotic plants as defined by the [Georgia Exotic Pest Plant Council](#). However, *Liriope muscari* is in Category 3, which GEPPC defines as “Exotic plant that is a minor problem in Georgia natural areas, or is not yet known to be a problem in Georgia but is known to be a problem in adjacent states.”

It is important to mention that many plant labels claim to be deer resistant. No plants are deer resistant, but they may be more deer tolerant, which means that deer may nibble them but do not prefer their foliage. However, in tough winters animals may resort to browsing less palatable plants, including some listed in this publication. Placing protection around newly installed plants is a good practice. Once well-established, plants can tolerate browsing.

Try to find as much pictorial information as possible when choosing plants. Growth rate and specific plant characteristics—such as evergreen leaves, interesting blooms, and/or attractive foliage—all should be considered (Figure 2). University of Georgia Extension publications, [Native Plants for Georgia Part II: Ferns](#) (B987-2) and [Native Plants for Georgia Part III: Wildflowers](#) (B987-3), are a good place to start.



Figure 1. USDA plant hardiness zones and average minimum temperatures for North Georgia counties.

Recommended top 30 ground covers for north Georgia shaded areas

Common Name	Botanical Name	Mature Height/ Spread	Growth Rate	Comments
1. Allegheny spurge*	<i>Pachysandra procumbens</i>	6–10 in. / 2–3 ft	Slow	Pink flowers in spring
2. Autumn fern	<i>Dryopteris erythrosora</i>	18–24 in. / 18–24 in.	Med.	Turns bronze in winter
3. Bishop's hat	<i>Epimedium</i> spp.	1 ft / 18 in.	Med.	Creamy yellow flowers in spring; likes uniform moisture
4. Bugleweed	<i>Ajuga reptans</i>	3–6 in. / 2 ft	Med.	Blue flower spikes in spring
5. Cast iron plant	<i>Aspidistra elatior</i>	1–2 ft / 1–2 ft	Med.	Tough plant for shade
6. Christmas fern**	<i>Polystichum acrostichoides</i>	1–2 ft / 18 in.	Med.	Likes moist soil with organic matter
7. Coral bells	<i>Heuchera</i> spp.	1–2 ft / 18 in.	Med.	Spring blooms
8. Creeping barberry*	<i>Mahonia repens</i>	1–3 ft / 1–2 ft	Med.	Tough plant
9. Dwarf Japanese plum yew	<i>Cephalotaxus harringtonia</i> 'Prostrata'	1–2 ft / 3 ft	Med.	Deer tolerant
10. Foamflower*	<i>Tiarella cordifolia</i>	6–12 in. / 18–24 in.	Med.	White flowers in spring
11. Green-and-gold	<i>Chrysogonum virginianum</i>	6 in. / 18–24 in.	Fast	Lovely, yellow daisy-like flowers.
12. Japanese painted fern	<i>Athyrium</i> spp.	1–2 ft / 1 ft	Slow	Needs moist, organic soil
13. Japanese spurge	<i>Pachysandra terminalis</i>	8–10 in. / 2 ft	Slow	May take 3+ years to cover an area
14. Lenten rose	<i>Helleborus orientalis</i>	12–18 in. / 2 ft	Med.	Many flower colors and cultivars; deer tolerant
15. Lily of the valley**	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	1 ft / 1 ft	Med.	White, fragrant bell-shaped flowers in spring

*Native to North America

**Native to Georgia

Common Name	Botanical Name	Mature Height/ Spread	Growth Rate	Comments
16. Liriope, clumping	<i>Liriope muscari</i>	6–12 in. / 1 ft	Med.	Many cultivars
17. Little brown jug	<i>Hexastylis (Asarum) arifolia</i>	2–4 in. / 1 ft	Slow	Interesting blooms; deer tolerant
18. Mazus	<i>Mazus repens</i>	3–6 in. / 1 ft	Med.	Lavender flowers in summer; likes moisture
19. Mondograss	<i>Ophiopogon japonicus</i>	6–10 in. / 1 ft	Med.	A dwarf form grows about 3 in. tall
20. New York fern**	<i>Thelypteris noveboracensis</i>	1–2 ft / 2–3 ft	Med.	Thrives in moist, shaded areas
21. Plantain lily, hosta	<i>Hosta sp.</i>	6 in.–3 ft / 2–3 ft	Med.	Summer flowers; many culti- vars; prone to deer grazing
22. Partridgeberry**	<i>Mitchella repens</i>	6 in. / 1 ft	Med.	Evergreen with white blooms and bright-red berries
23. Smooth Solo- mon's seal**	<i>Polygonatum biflorum</i>	1–2 ft / 2 ft	Med.	Deer tolerant
24. Southern lady fern	<i>Athyrium asplenoides</i>	20–30 in. / 1 ft	Med.	Best in moist, shady woodlands
25. Southern maidenhair fern	<i>Adiantum capillus- veneris</i>	10–20 in. / 1 ft	Med.	Needs moist, organic soil
26. Spikemoss	<i>Selaginella spp.</i>	2–4 in. / 1–2 ft	Med.	Needs moist, organic soil
27. Strawberry geranium	<i>Saxifraga stolonifera</i>	6–12 in. / 2 ft	Fast	Likes moist, organic soil
28. Spotted lungwort	<i>Pulmonaria saccharata</i>	10–12 in. / 1–2 ft		Attractive foliage with lavender blooms
29. Virginia chain fern	<i>Woodwardia virginica</i>	2–3 ft / 3–4 ft	Med.	Plant in wet, shady areas
30. Woodland phlox	<i>Phlox divaricata</i>	10–12 in. / 1–2 ft	Med.	Early spring bloom

*Native to North America

**Native to Georgia

Figure 2. Selected ground covers. Photos: B. Pennisi, C. Evans (chain fern), G. Wade (little brown jug), & Ed McDowell (Solomon's seal).



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