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## HOME-GARDEN

# Layering with ground covers: Building a beautiful, low-maintenance garden

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When planning a garden, I always start by thinking in layers. Varying plant heights not only adds visual depth but also creates opportunities for sustainable gardening practices and supports habitat for wildlife. Pollinators especially benefit, as layered gardens allow them to move more safely from bloom to bloom.

I begin with the largest elements — trees and shrubs that form the framework — and then move down to perennials, finally finishing with ground covers. Though they're often the last to be added, ground covers are one of the most valuable components. These low-growing plants perform many of the same functions as mulch but require far less upkeep once established. They help suppress weeds and retain soil moisture. Choosing perennial varieties eliminates the need for annual mulching, sparing your back from pushing wheelbarrows every spring.

As with any planting decision, match the plant to the site. Some ground covers thrive in sun. Others prefer shade. Soil moisture, traffic levels, and surrounding plants should all factor into your choice, too. For example, certain ground covers tolerate foot traffic well, while others are better suited to undisturbed areas.

Ground covers can also solve garden challenges. They're excellent for stabilizing slopes and preventing erosion, and they outperform turfgrass under trees. Lawns under thirsty trees often struggle, requiring extra water and frequent mowing that can damage tree roots. A water-wise, or drought-tolerant, ground cover is a

healthier and more sustainable option, especially as we seek to build climate resilience in our gardens.

When you walk around a public garden, like New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill, where we pay close attention to designing in layers, you'll discover there is no shortage of plants that can be used as effective—and gorgeous—ground covers. Here are a few of my favorites:

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## Bugleweed

One of my favorite choices for part sun to shade is bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*). Its foliage ranges from green to deep red or variegated, and it produces spikes of purple-blue flowers in late spring. It spreads quickly via runners and has even crept into my lawn, which I don't mind — it's always a pleasant surprise to see those flower spikes appear.

## Phlox

For showy blooms, phlox is another solid option. Creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*) handles part shade well, while moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*) thrives in full sun and dazzles with vibrant color in spring.

## Thyme

In high-traffic areas, consider thyme. I use a mix of lemon thyme (*Thymus citriodorus*) and woolly thyme (*Thymus pseudolanuginosus*) between stepping stones. The lemon thyme releases a fresh citrus scent as you walk over it, while the woolly thyme evokes a more classic, savory aroma.

## Sedum

For sunny, dry areas, stonecrops (*Sedum and Hylotelphium*) are tough to beat. Their fleshy, colorful leaves and late-season blooms add interest year-round.

Varieties like 'Angelina' offer bright chartreuse foliage that blushes rosy in fall, while October daphne (*Hylotelphium sieboldii*) boasts blue-toned leaves and clusters of pink flowers. Dark-leaved cultivars such as 'Purple Emperor' or the SunSparkler® series provide rich contrast and thrive in water-wise gardens and green roofs.

## Wild Strawberry

For a sweet treat, consider wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*). This native perennial can tolerate foot traffic and is quick to spread through runners that trail along the soil and take root. Its flowers are a favorite for short-tongued bees and other pollinators. Plus, you can enjoy berries in mid-summer, that is, if you can beat the wildlife to them!

Ground covers may be small, but their impact is big. With thoughtful selection, they'll reduce your maintenance load, support pollinators, and beautify your garden from the ground up. Whether you're solving a slope problem or simply want to give your mulch a break, there's a ground cover that's right for the job.

*Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at [nebg.org](https://nebg.org). The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.*

