

# Evergreen Woody Groundcovers in the Winter Landscape

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Homeowners and landscape professionals. Cities and towns. And the great and unavoidable land shapers of the highway departments in Washington, California, and Oregon. No matter how small or grand their domains, all frequently find a need for plants that simply and effectively cover large areas of their planting design—unifying and easy on the eye in the winter landscape when so many trees, shrubs, and perennials are dormant or low key in appearance, but also endowed with practical advantages of erosion control and weed suppression. The benefits of some of the best of the woody, mostly evergreen groundcovers are well worth the effort it may take to establish the plants. That effort often includes irrigation, since naturally dry summers in the West are often the biggest challenge to establishing coverage in large areas, even for otherwise drought-tolerant plants.

The better groundcovers will suppress weeds but will not prevent or eliminate aggressive weeds in most situations. The invasion of unwanted volunteers can be a daunting problem. Alas, there is no effective control over such persistent weeds as horsetail, quack grass, clover, buttercup, and other running perennials. Good results can be achieved using plants that will grow over these weeds and shade them out. Weed suppression can be achieved, in part, by a build up of leaf litter, which pre-

vents light from reaching the soil surface, thus hindering weed seed germination. This can be done with salal (*Gaultheria shallon*), and, to a lesser degree, low-growing forms of *Arctostaphylos*, *Ceanothus*, *Cotoneaster*, *Euonymus*, and *Rubus*. These last five evergreens will cover well simply by spreading horizontally, with minimal stem rooting, but an eventual overlap capable of suppressing most annual weeds.

## Five Dependable Groundcovers

Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* and its cultivars) is a prostrate shrub with long, low arching branches that seldom root as they travel. Preferring sunny, well-drained slopes, this West Coast native needs only minimal summer water. Clusters of small pink flowers appear in late spring, followed by a few bright red fruit. Kinnikinnick is a bit better behaved than *Ceanothus*, usually needing less pruning.

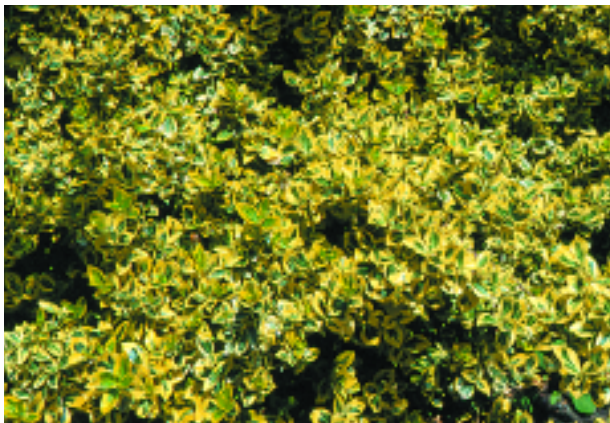
Groundcover forms of the blue-flowered Point Reyes ceanothus (*Ceanothus gloriosus*), as well as other species and cultivars, flourish in tough conditions. This species has long, flat branches that will arch over one another, but may remain sparse for the first three years. It loves a good sunny slope with sharp drainage, and will appreciate some pruning. There may be a bit of dieback in ceanothus, but this can be



*Podocarpus lawrencei* 'Red Tip'. Photographs by Lynne Harrison



*Cotoneaster procumbens* 'Queen of Carpets'



*Euonymus fortunei* 'Emerald 'N' Gold'



Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*)



Long-leaf mahonia (*Mahonia nervosa*)



*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* 'Vancouver Jade'



*Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *humilis*



*Genista pilosa* 'Vancouver Gold' combined with common thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)



*Rubus pentalobus* covering the ground beneath a cut-leaf Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*) and lily-of-the-valley shrub (*Pieris japonica*)

removed at any time. Plant gallon-sized pots of *Ceanothus* and *Arctotaphylos* about eighteen to twenty-four inches on center to achieve coverage in three years. Both perform well with bark or other organic mulch.

*Cotoneaster dammeri* 'Lowfast' (known by a variety of other names) is a good groundcover for slopes or for draping over walls. Small white flowers appear in late spring, but little fruit is set. Summer watering is a must initially, but plants are drought tolerant once established. Prune out any dead branches as you see them. Plant from gallon pots, eighteen inches on center for relatively quick coverage.

*Cotoneaster procumbens* 'Queen of Carpets' is a superb groundcover for irregular slopes or rockeries, as it hugs the ground and achieves good coverage by overlapping itself. White flowers appear in summer, but almost no fruit is set. This species needs to be maintained diligently in the first two years, as it is almost impossible to get weeds out once they have settled in. Do not let established plants dry out. Plant from one-gallon or two-gallon pots, as close as the budget will allow, as this one is slow to get started.

*Euonymus fortunei* cultivars, with colorful, often variegated leaves, are ideal groundcovers for most gardens. They make a valuable contribution to the winter landscape, and to other seasons as well. Some of the popular cultivars found in nurseries are 'Emerald 'n' Gold', 'Coloratus', 'Kewensis', and 'Variegatus'. 'Emerald 'n' Gold' is a particularly interesting cultivar with glossy, dark green, yellow-margined leaves that turn pinkish red in winter. All of the cultivars are easy to grow, tolerant of many conditions (except really wet soil), and simple to prune for shape and appearance; extensive pruning is seldom necessary.

*Rubus pentalobus* (syn. *R. calycinoides*) has stiff, horizontal stems to about three feet long, with some side shoots; it can be encouraged to branch further by tip pruning. Best in full sun, it will bear edible orange fruit similar to those of salmonberry (*R. spectabilis*). Plantings should be kept carefully weeded for the first two years. Plant from gallon pots, eighteen inches on center, or closer for quicker coverage. Once *Rubus* knits together, weeds are not usually a problem.

## Broadening the Palette

It's difficult to stop at just these five when there are so many other possibilities . . .

Wintergreen (*Gautheria procumbens*) is a good groundcover for shady sites. Crush and smell one of the red fruits to enjoy the familiar aroma. Small, dark, shiny leaves turn bronze and red in winter when the plant displays its fruits. The pink flowers, flushed white, are urn shaped—typical of most ericaceous plants. Spreading by stolons, it is relatively slow to cover, so plant about twelve inches on center. Wintergreen does not like competition; keep aggressive plants far away. It requires humus-rich, acid soil and year-round moisture.

Brooms are tough plants that work hard on slopes and in rock gardens. *Genista lydia* completely smothers itself with yellow flowers in spring. It's a slow but steady grower with arching, leafless branches, eventually forming an impressive ground-covering shrub. *Genista pilosa* is more ground hugging, but also has yellow flowers. Prune in spring to clean the brooms of any winter damage. All like hot, sunny conditions and are drought tolerant. Colorful stems provide winter interest and achieve an evergreen effect.

Our native mahonias are great additions to the garden, particularly in winter. Long-leaf mahonia (*Mahonia nervosa*) and creeping mahonia (*M. repens*) are tough, deer-resistant shrubs adaptable to any reasonable soil, even dry shade. Both bear bright yellow flowers in dense racemes, followed by blue black fruit. Long-leaf mahonia has glossy, dark green foliage that turns red or purple in winter. Creeping mahonia has dull, blue green leaves that become bronzy in cold weather. Increasing by suckers, both are slow to cover. For best results, set well-grown, gallon-sized plants relatively close, perhaps no more than twelve to eighteen inches on center.

*Podocarpus lawrencei* is a yew-like conifer that can be used as a groundcover but may need careful pruning, as it is can develop an upright habit. Place in full sun to partial shade (in California), give it well-drained soil, and watch for any vertical new growth, which can be pruned out at any time. We have seen *P. lawrencei* used at the

edge of a mixed shrub border, where it spreads outward to reach more light. It is effective under small willows (*Salix*), Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*), and other shrubs of similar scale, creeping outward to soften a gravel path. Several newer cultivars of *P. lawrencei* make excellent garden plants and, with a little shaping, good groundcovers. 'Blue Gem' has rich blue green foliage; 'Red Tip' sports purple red new growth that turns bronzy and then green in summer. Plant gallon-sized plants no more than three feet on center. Slow to establish, they will eventually grow quickly.

*Prunus laurocerasus* 'Mt Vernon' is an exceptionally useful small shrub, a dwarf form of the common and aggressive English laurel. Dense and compact (under two feet tall), it spreads

slowly to four or five feet wide. A tough evergreen, it tolerates drought, poor soil, and even dry shade, once established.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is the plant that gardeners in the Northwest would love to use more—if a truly hardy cultivar were available. Most rosemaries showed damage from this past winter's snow and cold; all of the prostrate selections died. With this caveat, the prostrate-growing cultivar 'Lockwood de Forest' is an excellent groundcover for gentle slopes and will drape vertically quite well. A flush of late-winter blue flowers is a bonus.

Rosemary can be pruned to shape at any time (especially during grilling season). With a bit of pruning, you can use 'Severn Sea', 'Irene', and 'Ken Taylor' as mounding groundcovers. Keeping them lower than two feet is a challenge, because of the vigorously arching branches. Plant rosemary two feet on center for coverage in about three years, or closer for a more rapid cover. One-gallon size is best, but smaller plants will grow quickly.

One of the best evergreen groundcovers for shade is *Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *humilis*, a slow spreader and the shortest of its genus at about twelve inches. Pungently fragrant white flowers compliment dark green glossy foliage and green stems in winter; small black fruits follow in summer. Plant sarcococca eighteen inches on center and expect to wait for coverage; the plants spread by stolons and knit together in a solid mass, becoming nearly weed proof. Watered regularly and deeply for the first year, sarcococca is relatively drought tolerant, once established.

Our gardens and landscapes are varied and complex, with different soils, growing conditions, and temperature ranges. For the health and appearance of a garden, it's important to keep the ground covered and as weed-free as possible. Thoroughly consider which groundcover will work best in each situation—especially in the winter months. To quote Rosemary Verey, "Planning the garden to take account of winter requires an overall framework and ground plan, as well as a planting scheme." 🌱



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