

INVEST IN YOUR LANDSCAPING

The Return is Worth It!



- \$ Did you know that some believe an attractive landscape can add 15% to the perceived value of a home?
- \$ Is your mature landscaping aging gracefully?
- \$ Does it look neat and attractive, like someone takes the time to lovingly prune the plantings each year?
- \$ Or does it look old, tired and beaten down?
- \$ Have you been less than attentive over the decades leaving a neglected appearance?
- \$ Is it overgrown to the point you can't see your windows and you have to turn sideways to walk to your front door?
- \$ Does it look good with the exception of one area or one plant that needs attention?

Mature and attractive landscaping is highly desirable by home buyers and helps set South Riding as well as your individual home apart from competing communities. There are tons of articles and studies on the internet spouting impressive statistics about the positive impact quality landscaping can have on property values, individually and community wide. Alex Niemiera, Extension Horticulturist with the Department of Horticulture at Virginia Tech, published a paper entitled "The Effect of Landscape Plants on Perceived Home Value" checking the theory that an attractive landscape adds 15% to the perceived value of a home. The paper is available in entirety at pubs.ext.vt.edu.

Take a step outside, look at your landscaping objectively and take the next best steps. Call a professional (many advertise in this magazine), visit a local nursery to meet with a landscape designer, talk to your 'green thumb' neighbors, check out videos on the internet, the resources are endless for inspiration.

Selecting Landscape Plants: Groundcovers

Alex X. Niemiera, Professor, School of Plant and Environmental Sciences, Virginia Tech

Introduction

Landscapes are composed of plants that form ceilings, walls, and floors spaces. Groundcovers serve as attractive carpets of foliage that cloak and beautify our landscape "floors" (fig. 1). A groundcover is a low-growing plant species — 3 feet tall or shorter — that spreads to form a relatively dense layer of vegetation. In covering bare soil, groundcovers reduce soil erosion and provide habitat for insects and other animals, along with a host of other positive environmental effects.



Figure 1. *Pachysandra terminalis* bed. All photographs are by the author.

Some groundcovers are suited to foot traffic. Turfgrass species, the most common groundcovers, are good examples of walk-on groundcovers. Turfgrasses, a lush green uniform carpet, is the quintessential groundcover. However, turfgrasses require a relatively high light exposure and frequent mowing in addition to other potential maintenance practices such as detaching, aerating, fertilizing, and controlling weeds, insects, and diseases.

There are numerous nonturfgrass groundcover species that require relatively few inputs (maintenance activities such as pruning and fertilizing) in order to maintain an attractive foliage mat. However, unlike turfgrass, most groundcover species are intolerant of foot traffic. Some groundcover species tolerate foot traffic, and they will be noted in an upcoming section.

The following sections address general groundcover topics to give the reader the insights and decision-making information to select an aesthetic living carpet that will flourish in the specific conditions of their landscape. Several groundcover species will be described in detail with descriptions of their appearance and cultural requirements (e.g., sun exposure and soil conditions). An additional list (without details) is also provided.

Groundcover Classifications

Groundcovers can be classified into groups based on several criteria, the most important being height, foliage persistence, method of spread, growth rate, and aesthetic characteristics.

Plant Height

A groundcover, sometimes classified as a small shrub, is generally regarded as a plant shorter than 3 feet tall. Of course, this size designation is somewhat arbitrary, but it serves as a general category of plants with a low stature. An important aspect of plant height is that short (1 foot or shorter) groundcovers are generally more prone to weed infestation than tall groundcovers. This is because a relatively short groundcover permits more light to penetrate the groundcover canopy, making weed seeds more likely to germinate and prosper. Conversely, tall groundcovers are less prone to weed infestation because less light penetrates the canopy.

Foliage density, irrespective of plant height, also impacts the likelihood of weed infestation. Foliage persistence (discussed next) also affects the likelihood of weed infestation. Plants that do not maintain year-round foliage — such as deciduous woody species that lose their leaves in the fall — and most herbaceous perennials, whose aboveground plant parts die in the cold season, are more likely to be invaded by weeds.

Foliage Persistence

The majority of groundcovers offered in garden centers are evergreen species — plants that retain foliage throughout the year — such as the Japanese pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*; fig. 2). However, there are groundcover species that are not evergreen. Examples of these are (1) deciduous woody perennial species such as some low-growing cotoneaster

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Virginia Cooperative Extension

The Effect of Landscape Plants on Perceived Home Value

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The value of an attractive landscape to a home's perceived value has often been stated at 15 percent. Is this figure reliable, and what landscape features do contribute to the value of a home? How does a landscape contractor convince his/her client to spend a significant amount on a home's construction budget on landscaping? Is this a wise investment? How can a homeowner justify spending thousands of dollars to landscape a newly constructed house? Or, will thousands of dollars worth of landscaping, significantly increase the "curb appeal" of a home for sale? To answer these questions, researchers conducted a seven-state survey of attendees at consumer home and garden shows to determine consumer perspective on how plant size, type, and design sophistication in a landscape affect the perceived value of a home (Bette et al., 2005).

The Survey

In 1999 survey respondents viewed a photo of a newly built suburban house with only a lawn and concrete driveway. They were then shown 16 photographs of this house with different plant sizes and types, and levels of design sophistication. Plant sizes were small, medium, or large based on available sizes of plant types

- (perennial, shrub, or tree) Design sophistication levels (see Figures 1, 2, 3) were: 1) foundation planting only, 2) foundation planting with one large, oblong island lawn, or 3) a foundation planting with adjoining beds and two or three large island plantings, all incorporating curved bed lines. Plant types were:
- evergreen only
 - evergreen and deciduous plants
 - evergreen and deciduous plants with 20 percent annual or perennial color
 - evergreen and deciduous plants, 20 percent annual or perennial color, and the addition of a color brick sidewalk entrance.

Survey Results

Survey respondents ranked design sophistication as most important, plant size as next important, and diversity of plant type as least important (Table 1).

Importance Rank	Landscape aspect	% of value added to home
1	Design sophistication	42
2	Plant size	36
3	Diversity of plant material type	22

Table 1. Survey results with the ranking of landscape aspects and the percent value that these aspects added to the home value.

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A Guide to Successful Pruning of Pruning Shrubs

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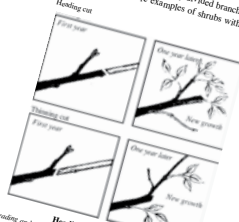
Growth Habit

Understanding the natural "habit" or shape of shrubs will help you determine how to prune them. All shrubs grow outward from their tips. Whether tips are removed, lower buds are stimulated to grow. Buds are located at nodes, where leaves are attached to twigs and branches. Each node produces from one to three buds, depending on shrub species.

Shrubs have mounding, cane, or tree-like growth habits. Those with mounding habits, such as evergreen azalea and spirea, generally have soft, flexible stems, small leaves, and are often used in mass plantings.

Shrubs with cane habits include Forsythia and sandalwood. These shrubs spread by sending up erect new branches, called canes, from their base.

Tree-like shrubs have woody, finely divided branches. Witch hazel and rhododendron are examples of shrubs with tree-like habits.



Heading and thinning cuts have different effects on subsequent growth.

How to Prune

There are two basic types of pruning cuts: heading cuts, and thinning cuts. Heading cuts stimulate growth of buds closest to the wound. Thinning cuts stimulate growth of buds closest to the wound. The direction in which the top remaining bud is pointing will determine the direction of new growth. Make heading cuts selectively to reduce shrub height and retain natural form. Non-selective heading cuts make indiscriminately vigorous shoots more attractive from buds below the cut. These vigorous shoots are unattractive and make shrubs bushier, but not smaller. Non-selective heading cuts are only justifiable when using hedge clippers on a hedge or topiary shrub.

Thinning cuts remove branches at their points of origin or attachment. Used in moderation, thinning cuts reduce shrub density without stimulating regrowth.



Make pruning cuts correctly. For heading cuts, prune 1/4 inch above the bud, sloping down and away from it. Avoid cutting too close, or steep, or the bud may die. When pruning above a node with two or more buds, remove the inward-facing ones. Make thinning cuts just above parent or side branches and roughly parallel to them.

Don't coat pruning cuts on shrubs with paint or wound dressing. These materials won't prevent decay or promote wound closure.

Maintenance Pruning

Deciduous shrubs require maintenance pruning to keep them healthy and in scale with their surroundings. Maintenance

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