

Low Ground Covers Less than 2' (-3') Tall for Use in Full Sun

Rosemary Carey (September 11, 2011)

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Ground covers are the workhorses of landscaping, particularly on large country lots. This article surveys ground covers for use in full sun, the most challenging landscaping situation in the foothills, where summer temperatures frequently exceed 100° degrees F. Extreme dryness is also inevitably associated with these high temperatures during the summer and fall, and can even be worsened by wind and reflected light from rocks and structures. There are both native shrubs and perennials of quite dense habit which are non-deciduous (i.e. evergreen) that are suitable ground covers even in these situations. Selection increases dramatically if one is willing to add drip irrigation, at least until the plants are well established, that is, at least three times the size that they were when planted. Note: **all watering recommendations are for established plants.**

Many of these native ground covers are highly attractive, while others are more utilitarian but still pleasing in a less showy way: their appearance is neat, with leaf colors ranging from silver to blue to true green. These latter plants can be especially useful feathering off into wildland vistas or under oak trees, which cannot tolerate chronic summer watering and will eventually die if under planted with conventional exotic lawn grasses which require frequent summer watering.

All of the perennials and most of the shrubs noted here will be available at our Fall plant sale October 1st. They will also be the **topic of our September 20th general meeting, where container specimens will be on hand for examination.**

Shrubs (from most drought tolerant to least drought tolerant)

dwarf coyote brush 'Pigeon Point'	Baccharis pilularis 'Pigeon Point',
dwarf coyote brush 'Twin Peaks'	B. pilularis 'Twin Peaks'
prostrate black sage	Salvia mellifera 'Terra Seca'
Creeping sage or Sonoma sage	Salvia sonomensis
Creeping sage hybrid	Salvia 'Bee's Bliss'
John Dourley manzanita	Arctostaphylos 'John Dourley'
Creeping mahonia	Berberis aquifolium var. repens
'Carmel Sur' manzanita	Arctostaphylos edmundsii 'Carmel Sur'
'Sunset' groundcover manzanita	Arctostaphylos 'Sunset'
Mt. Vision wild lilac	Ceanothus gloriosus var. porrectus
Emily's hallelujah bush	Ceanothus gloriosus var. exaltatus 'Emily Brown'
Emerald carpet manzanita	Arctostaphylos 'Emerald Carpet'
'Pt. Reyes' bearberry manzanita	Arctostaphylos uva-ursi 'Pt. Reyes' (not recommended)
'Radiant' bearberry manzanita	A. uva-ursi 'Radiant': (definitely not recommended)

Perennials

Yarrow	Achillea millefolium
Silver Carpet California aster	Lessingia filaginifolia 'Silver Carpet'
Mexican daisy, Santa Barbara daisy	Erigeron karvinskianus* (*non-native, but easy to find)
Point St. George coast aster	Aster chilensis 'Point Saint George'
Everett's Choice California fuchsia	Epilobium canum 'Everett's Choice'
California fuchsia	Epilobium canum var. canum
California goldenrod	Solidago californica
California skullcap	Scutellaria californica

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Turf alternatives

Clustered field sedge	<i>Carex praegracilis</i>
Blue grama grass	<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i>
Side-oats grama grass	<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i>

Shrub Ground Covers

1. My favorite no-fuss, ideal ground cover is 'Pigeon Point' dwarf coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis* 'Pigeon Point'). It is fast growing in a reliably even habit less than 2' tall, and 10' wide. The leaves are bright, light green. Very tough and drought-tolerant, it can be grown without drip irrigation: plant in the early Fall and then deep water at least once a month (2x/month is better) during the dry season for the first three years until its roots have gone deep. It's an excellent slope holder. Another selection of dwarf coyote brush is 'Twin Peaks': it grows higher in the center, up to 3' tall and 8' wide. Its smaller leaves are held tightly along the stems. They are bright green in spring, becoming gray-green in summer. Both selections can be sheared or even mowed. They are dense enough to discourage weeds, and are deer resistant.
2. Prostrate black sage (*Salvia mellifera* 'Terra Seca') is also very drought-tolerant and can be grown without drip irrigation, following the same dry season procedure as in the above paragraph. It grows roughly 2' tall by 8' (or more) wide. It is fragrant, and an important bee plant in the wild, but its' very pale blue, almost white, flowers are not showy. It is deer proof.
3. Creeping sage hybrid (*Salvia* 'Bee's Bliss') has light gray leaves with periwinkle blue flowers on a 1' tall stalk. It reaches 1-2' tall and spreads quickly to 8' wide. As with the preceding two, it can be grown without drip irrigation if the dry season procedure is followed. It attracts hummingbirds and butterflies, and is deer resistant. Creeping sage (*Salvia sonomensis*) is more prostrate and mat forming. It has flowers that range from blue-violet to pale lavender on flower stems that may be nearly 1' above the mats, and is locally native. It is deer resistant.
4. 'John Dourley' manzanita is a vigorous, easily grown, sturdy, little shrub, spreading up to 6' wide and eventually up to 3' tall. It has coppery new growth which becomes small, broad, blue-green leaves. It has a long blooming season. As with the preceding three, it can be grown without drip irrigation if the dry season procedure is followed.
5. Creeping Mahonia (*Berberis aquifolium* var. *repens*) spreads by creeping rhizomes to form small drifts 1-2' tall. Leaflets of the pinnately compound leafs are duller than most mahonias, and often bluish green with lighter undersides. In winter they are often painted plum-purple throughout. S-l-o-w growing, it will grow faster with at least a little dappled afternoon shade. This is drought-tolerant sub-shrub which can be grown without drip irrigation if the dry season procedure is followed. Drip irrigation and early pinching of the growing tips will form a thicker ground cover much faster than less generous treatment.
6. 'Carmel Sur' manzanita (*Arctostaphylos edmundsii* 'Carmel Sur') has a low, tailored growth habit, which forms a truly elegant ground cover with mature plants reaching 1- (rarely 2') tall and 6' wide. New foliage in spring is bright and shiny green along the prostrate ground-hugging stems, which matures to gray green leaves. Fast-growing, it almost never blooms. Plant 4-5'

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apart and the established plantings will be dense enough to shade out most annual weeds. It should be watered at least twice/month, but can also be watered more frequently as it is tolerant of garden watering, as long as the site is well-draining and the water doesn't stand on it. It will grow faster with at least a little dappled afternoon shade.

7. 'Sunset' manzanita is a sprawling, evergreen shrub that commonly grows 3' high and 6' wide. If you shear the top a few times the plant can be easily held to 2' tall. It has dark red bark, white (with a little pink) flowers, and bright bronze-red new growth which becomes medium green foliage. Because it stays dense with age, it makes an ideal low hedge. Tolerant of many situations, it grows rapidly when well-sited. It should be watered at least twice/month, but it will grow best on drip irrigation.

8. Mt. Vision wild lilac (*Ceanothus gloriosus* var. *porrectus*) forms a mat usually under 2' in height and spreading 5 or 6'. It has lavender blue flowers in mid-spring, and is very attractive on slopes. It has tiny holly-like leaves which are deer resistant. It will grow better with at least a little dappled afternoon shade. It should be watered at least twice/month, but can also tolerate garden watering if it is on a timer with other plants, as long as the site is well-draining and the water doesn't stand on it. It will grow faster with at least a little dappled afternoon shade.

9. Emily's hallelujah bush (*Ceanothus gloriosus* var. *exaltatus* 'Emily Brown') is a low spreading shrub of 2 or 3' in height and 5-10' in width. It has small spiny evergreen leaves which are deer resistant. It is one of the earliest blooming of the wild California lilacs, with dense, showy umbels of glowing blue-violet flowers in spring. It should be watered at least twice/month, but can also tolerate up to 2x weekly watering, as long as the site is well-draining and the water doesn't stand on it. It will grow faster with at least a little dappled afternoon shade.

10. 'Emerald carpet' manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* 'Emerald Carpet') grows 1-2' high and spreads until it becomes a carpet 6' wide. Elliptical, small, narrow, lucid-green leaves are aptly called emerald. Pretty white flowers are carried in small clusters. It has a marked sensitivity to alkaline soils and can become chlorotic, which can be corrected with generous doses of iron sulfate. It needs weekly irrigation, but should not be watered by overhead irrigation as that may induce various leaf and stem blights.

11. 'Pt. Reyes' bearberry manzanita or sometimes called 'Pt. Reyes' kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* 'Pt. Reyes') is prostrate with polished forest-green leaves that are thickly set on rooting, shiny red stems 4-18" tall. Eventually it will cover a 15' wide area. It has bell-shaped blushing pink flowers in spring. Of all the bearberry manzanita selections, it is the best choice for the foothills. 'Radiant' makes lush carpets with bright green leaves and abundant large berries, but it isn't as tough as 'Pt. Reyes'. Both need weekly irrigation, but should not be watered by overhead irrigation as it may induce various leaf and stem blights. They also may suffer from chlorosis which can be corrected with regular applications of a foliar nitrogen fertilizer. Both benefit from afternoon shade. With all of these problems both of these bearberries were only included in this list because they are widely available and often promoted by nurseries and garden centers, rather than from any personal endorsement, so be forewarned. I recommend #6 for the same look of mats that flow gracefully over rocks and mounds.