

Kathy Jentz, Garden Communicator

Kathy Jentz is editor and publisher of Washington Gardener Magazine and host of the GardenDC Podcast. She is the author of *Groundcover Revolution* and co-author of *The Urban Garden*. A life-long gardener, Kathy believes that growing plants should be stress-free and enjoyable. Her philosophy is inspiration over perspiration Find her at @WDCGardener on Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram



Groundcover Establishment Tips

The goal of an established groundcover is to create a solid, healthy root zone that does not allow weeds to germinate or flourish. There will likely be some weeding required as the groundcover plants get situated and fill in. There is an old garden adage: “First year sleep, second year creep, third year leap.” This saying is just as applicable to groundcovers as to any other plant.

Meaning, the first year it is in the ground it is spending its time reviving from transplant shock, getting used to the new growing conditions, and expanding its roots in the new soil. You may not see much growth on top, but it is happening at the cellular level.

The second year, it is started to hit its stride and testing out its boundaries and situation. It will start putting out tentative growth forays and seeing if those are successful. You will start to see a bit of growth and increase.

The third year, the plant has got its bearing and is now ready to flourish. You will see a great increase in growth and size. That is why it is best to not move or divide a plant until after its third year, as doing so earlier will reset that three-year adaptation clock. If you do not see a third year leap, then reevaluate if the plant needs to be moved to another location where it may do better.

While you wait this three-year cycle’s development, fill in any bare areas between your groundcover plants with a light organic mulch. This will help suppress weeds, hold in soil moisture, and insulate the plants’ roots from extreme heat and cold.



Available at local book stores, Amazon, Bookshop.org, etc.



Tips for Installing and Maintaining Groundcovers

While groundcovers are known as low-maintenance, they are not no-maintenance. Nothing is. Even a concrete driveway needs sweeping when debris accumulates on it, the occasional resealing/repair, and snow shoveled off when it piles up.

Groundcovers require a bit of effort to provide them with proper planting conditions to give them a good start. Then, they will need some upkeep during their first few years. After that, they should be fairly maintenance-free. Depending on which plants you choose to use as groundcovers, you may need to touch them only once a year or every few years.

When starting your groundcover, your choice will be dictated by the various conditions of the planting area. Is it shady or sunny? Wet or dry? Flat or sloped? Once you have chosen the best groundcover variety for your situation. You need to know its eventual spread and mature size. Then you will determine how close to plant them.

Note that there will also be some variation among different cultivars of the same kind of groundcover. For instance, some creeping junipers spread from 3-4 feet, while others will sprawl out to 8-10 feet. That will make a big impact on how far apart you initially space your plants.

Using the example of creeping junipers that eventually spread to 3-4 feet, first measure the area you wish to cover. For this hypothetical, we'll say it is 20 feet wide and long. You would plant each one at least three feet from its neighbor, so to fill the space, you will need 3 plants total. There are online calculators provided by groundcover sellers that can assist you with these calculations.

The plants should be placed in a triangle or diamond pattern rather than lined up in a row, unless you are filling in a long, linear border area.

There may be some locations in your landscape in which just one, solid groundcover may not be the best solution or you may prefer a mix of plants as a more aesthetically pleasing alternative. In either case, you might use a matrix planting method in which you combine a low-growing groundcover with a higher-growing plant.

In a matrix, planting two or more plants occupy their own root space, but their top growth is overlapping and intermixed. They may emerge and die-back at different times in the growing season. Matrix plantings can be extremely complex, depending on the number of plant choices you include.

To start off, you might choose two plants that mix well together and then experiment with spring-blooming bulbs and annual flowers direct-sown by seeds in any bare spots around them until the matrix fully fills in. In this option, you would not mulch the bare soil or do so very sparingly.

