



Pruning Ground Covers

Pruning ground covers is usually necessary only to remove unhealthy tissue, awkward or straggling branches, or to keep a plant from becoming too invasive. Many ground covers are prone to decline as they age, however. Others are so vigorous that controlling their growth is an ongoing maintenance task. Periodic mowing is one way you can keep ground covers vigorous, neat, and healthy with no significant loss of attractiveness. Mowing is a convenient way to check rampant growth, thin out excessive stem buildup and rejuvenate old, declining ground covers. Mowing also helps minimize problems with trash, vermin, fire, and sprinkler interference.

Suitable Ground Covers. Not all ground covers are suitable for mowing. Less vigorous varieties recover slowly, leaving an unsightly area prone to weed infestation for up to a year. Species with recovery times as long as 4 months still can gain in overall quality from mowing, however. Vigorous species, which usually recover within 1 or 2 months, respond well to mowing. Mowing can check their growth without harming visual appeal for an extended period. For example, in recent field studies at the University of California, mowing kept the growth of lantana in check yet had a negligible effect on overall quality. Other species, such as African daisy and coyote bush, responded similarly. Varieties with herbaceous or nonfibrous stems are also good candidates for mowing because it is easy to cut and bag their stems.

Timing of Mowing. Mowing ground covers at the correct time ([table 13.4](#)) is important to ensure quick recovery with little weed invasion or loss of aesthetic value. Mow spring-flowering species after they have finished blooming. Mowing too early reduces or delays flowering. Spring mowing is appropriate for varieties that flower in summer or fall. Avoid late-summer and fall mowing because the tender regrowth may be susceptible to early frost damage, and regrowth can be slow allowing weeds to invade the planting.

If ground covers develop heavy, succulent, or woody stems, they may become too difficult to mow. Mowing chops up the fleshy growth of succulent species, such as ice plant, making it impossible to collect and remove the cut debris. Large stems of woody species can clog or jam a mower. To achieve acceptable results, start mowing ground covers when they are young—just after establishment—and continue mowing regularly thereafter.

Mowing Techniques. Use an ordinary commercial rotary turf mower for ground covers with thin, nonfibrous stems and little thatch buildup, such as trailing lantana and garden verbena. Use a flail mower on ground covers with thick, woody stems or thatch buildup. Though flail mowers are relatively cumbersome, they may be necessary for the initial cut. A rotary mower should be adequate for subsequent mowings, if you perform them regularly.

Mow ground covers at or slightly above the branching points on stems—in most cases, 4 to 6 inches (10 to 15 cm) high. Although you usually cannot set mowers this high, a rotary turf mower tends to ride up on top of the ground cover as you mow. Thus, if you set the mower at its maximum cutting height, the cut should be acceptable. Mowing too low slows recovery, and mowing too high will not achieve the desired result. You may have to experiment to determine the best mowing height for a particular ground cover and condition.

Mow in the same pattern as an irregular turf area. Back-and-forth movement, keeping to the contours of the site, is best. Manually collect heavy clippings if the ground cover is so dense that the clippings remain on top as unsightly debris. Otherwise, let the clippings fall into the ground cover where they will decompose, or collect them in the mower bag as you would when mowing turf.

- For rapid recovery and to ensure good ground cover vigor, irrigate and fertilize with 1 to 2 pounds (0.45 to 0.9 kg) of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet (93 square meters) after mowing.
- Use a preemergence herbicide if recovery is slow and the ground cover is sparse. Check crop registrations and follow all label directions.
- Delay postbloom mowing if ground cover has a showy display of fruits.
- Consider an additional mowing to remove old, unsightly flowerheads or objectionable seeds or fruits. Set the mower height to remove seeds or fruit but not vegetative growth.

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