



INCREASING HABITAT WITH NATIVE GROUND COVERS

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Are you considering adding ground covers to fill spaces between shrubs or along pathways? Fall is the perfect time to add plants due to cooler temperatures with anticipated winter rains. Before you head to a local nursery, let's step back and consider your goals.

Traditional goals for selecting ground covers include being evergreen, attractive year-round, low growing, wider than taller, and fast growing. An additional consideration may be adding fragrance. One nursery advertises two grasses, manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*), myoporum (*Myoporum parvifolium*), periwinkle (*Vinca minor*), and trailing rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus* 'Prostratus').

Are you also interested in attracting birds, butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees to your garden? Then selecting ground covers that are native to your area becomes a primary consideration. By adding native plants, you'll increase the type and number of insects in your garden that will consequently provide more food for birds, butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees.

In *The Living Landscape: Designing for beauty and biodiversity in the home garden*, Doug Tallamy describes how "the potential botanical biodiversity of a garden's herbaceous layer is much greater than that of any other aboveground layer... From the perspective of wildlife, a more diverse herbaceous layer provides more varied shelter and cover. An overlapping sequence of bloom throughout the season translates to a continual source of nectar and pollen along with a steady supply of ripening seeds and fruits." So let's focus on providing wildlife a sequence of ground covers that are native to both Nevada and Placer Counties.



Photo by Marianne Calhoun

A hummingbird enjoys the fall blooms of California fuchsia.

If your property receives a mix of sun and shade, consider planting several ground covers to bloom throughout the year. Pinemat (*Ceanothus prostratus*) has fragrant whitish blue flowers that bloom from late winter to early spring and appeal to butterflies. Common yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) has fragrant white flat flower clusters in spring and summer with occasional flowers in fall and winter; USDA zones 3-9. Foothill penstemon (*Penstemon heterophyllus*) has bluish purple tubular flowers that bloom mid-spring to early summer and are attractive to hummingbirds; USDA zones 6-10. Lastly, California goldenrod (*Solidago velutina* ssp. *californica*) has golden yellow flower spikes throughout the summer and into fall; the flowers appeal to butterflies.

There are two ground covers to consider for the sunny parts of your garden. Sulfur buckwheat (*Eriogonum umbellatum*) has bright yellow clusters appealing to butterflies throughout the summer and into fall; USDA zones 3-8. California fuchsia (*Epilobium canum*) is semi-evergreen with orangish red tubular flowers that bloom mid-summer to mid-fall and attract hummingbirds; USDA zones 8+.

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For the shady parts of your garden, consider spring-flowering ground covers. Creeping barberry (*Berberis aquifolium* var. *repens*) has fragrant yellow flowers followed by edible blue tart berries in the summer; USDA zones 4-8. Crevice alumroot (*Heuchera micrantha*) has creamy white flowers which attract hummingbirds; USDA zones 4-9. Creeping sage (*Salvia sonomensis*), pictured below, has fragrant light blue flowers also attracting hummingbirds; USDA zones 8-10.

You now have nine options for native ground covers that attract birds, butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees to your garden in addition to being evergreen, attractive year-round, low growing, wider than taller, and fast growing! A website created by the California Native Plant Society, Calscape, provides detailed plant descriptions as well as nurseries for purchasing.



References

- Calscape. California Native Plant Society. <http://calscape.org>
- Darke, Rick and Doug Tallamy. *The Living Landscape: Designing for beauty and biodiversity in the home garden*. Timber Press. 2014.

UC Master Gardeners of Placer County are University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) ambassadors to the Placer County home gardening community. Master Gardeners promote environmental awareness and sustainable landscape practices, and extend research-based gardening and composting information to the public through educational outreach. UCCE is part of the Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) of the University of California.