



## Ground covers

Some people think the only landscape choices in the Mojave are either a turf grass lawn or barren rock mulch. This limits the visual palette so much, and misses a group of plants that can serve some of the functions of either.

Ground covers are **not** lawns where you can play touch football, but the dog **can** run around on them and not hurt tender paws. They grow low to the ground, and shade the soil, like mulch.

In areas with an abundance of rainfall, ground covers are popular; but even here, where water is rare and precious, we can grow these useful and pretty plants. Some are really drought tolerant, particularly those that are categorized as “ice plant”.

Most of them produce flowers through much of the scorching summer and other times as well.

Each is very low growing, rarely getting more than about six inches tall, with succulent leaves to hold water. All the ice plants, whether *Lampranthus*, *Myoporum*, *Delosperma*, *Drosanthemum*, or *Malephora*, have this attractive habit. The leaves are usually less than an inch long except for

the Hottentot ice plant (properly known as *Carpobrotus edulis*), which has thick triangular leaves a couple of inches long or more.

There are other choices as well, and while they need a little more water than ice plant, they do not need much more. One of these is *Achillea tomentosa*, yellow-flowered wooly yarrow.

*Artemisia caucasica*, “silver spreader”, is actually a cousin of sagebrush and wormwood; interesting grey leaves and a unique, pleasant, aroma.

The flowers of the tough “cape weed” (*Arctotheca calendula*) look like a cross between yellow primrose and a dandelion, and it sounds tough as nails.



*Artemisia caucasica*-silver spreader

*Dymondia margaretae* has yellow flowers and long, slender leaves - silvery green on top, with white undersides. It needs protection from chill. While not a lawn this ground cover can take some traffic.

Many ground covers also work well in rock gardens – as will a few members of the genus *Arabis*. So can the plant we call cranesbill. The first time I saw this it was growing wild outside the Red Rock visitor center. Some people think of cranesbill (*Erodium reichardii*), as a weed, but it is more. The Southwest Garden Book describes it as a *dainty plant*. The flowers are sweet: pink, very simple, five petals, about ½ inch across.

This might sound like a lot of choices, but there are a lot more that I didn’t even mention.

If you would like to try a little variety, decide whether your landscape would benefit from the addition of low growing, flowering plants. Before you buy anything, see if it can survive our droughty conditions and salty soil. Just because you can **buy** it does not mean it is ready for the Mojave.

You might not want to put in acres of ground cover, but in a smallish area they can add a beautiful green, and many of them flower – better than turf grass, which, when you think about it, could also be considered a groundcover.

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