

Ground covers used to minimize maintenance around trees

Maintaining turf in the shade under established trees is an ongoing battle. Mowing grass over large surface roots is hard on both the tree and the mower. Grass growing next to the trunk also needs to be kept trimmed but doing so risks hitting the trunk with the mower and causing injuries which could lead to the death of the tree!

Organic mulch can solve these problems, but needs regular replacement. Inorganic mulches, such as rubber or stone are an option, but are considerably more costly and sometimes (though not commonly) be opposed to by your HOA and Village Association bylaws

A simpler solution that minimizes long-term maintenance and enhances the beauty of the trees is the installation of ground covers.

Ground covers are not only practical solutions, they can also be eye-catching design features.

- A ground cover planting composed of a **single species or cultivar** is easy to plan and plant, and its simplicity adds a formal element to the landscape.
- **Groupings of several different ground covers** that drift into one another give the planting a more garden-like (some people refer to that look as English or Cottage Garden) look, especially if you combine plants with showy flowers or colorful foliage.
- **Mixing up to four to six different ground covers** similar in height and setting them out in no particular pattern creates a natural-looking effect.

Planting Around Established Trees

The root systems of even large trees tend to be surprisingly shallow, especially in heavy clay based soils. The feeder roots of plants (and many trees and shrubs including Maples, Sweet Gums, and many other species of large shade trees do not have deep growing tap roots and only feeder roots) will generally only grow in the aerobic soil zone, that zone in which oxygen is present. In clay based soils the aerobic zone rarely exceeds 6 inches though the diameter of the root may grow to a depth of 10". So the roots of that huge tall maple may only be occupying the top 10 inches of your yard! Therefore, you should avoid disturbing the soil as much as possible. Instead of using a sod cutter to remove the grass and weeds, strip them off manually and shallowly with a shovel. Or, if absolutely necessary, carefully apply an top kill herbicide, such as round-up (*a/k/a glyphosate*) to kill the vegetation, wait at least three days, often needing to reapply two to three times for a complete kill, and then plant through the dead turf.

DO NOT spread a thick layer of topsoil around the tree to create a fresh planting bed because changing the grade more than an inch or two may seriously damage (read that as KILL) the tree roots. Instead, dig individual holes for each plant, avoiding the medium and large-sized roots as much as possible.

Planting Around New Trees

Establishing a ground cover at the same time you plant trees is a much easier project. First, remove or kill the existing sod. If you're setting out large trees, it's usually best to settle them in and then create the planting bed around them so you're not compacting loosened soil with heavy foot traffic or machinery.

With more easily managed tree sizes, prepare the entire area first and then do all of the planting at the same time. Newly planted trees typically don't cast much shade, so you can use ground-covers adapted for partial shade or full sun.

After Planting Care

Add a 2 to 3 inch-layer of mulch (either organic or inorganic) and water thoroughly to wet the soil and mulch. The need for future applications of organic mulch will be greatly reduced as the ground covers fill out the planted area. Water during dry spells (which includes our summers for even though we get numerous thunderstorms these storms drop lots of moisture in a short period and most of the water will run off before being absorbed by the soil) for at least the first growing seasons of the year following installation to get the ground cover off to a good start. Regular watering is especially critical for plantings under established trees because they have to compete with the tree roots for moisture.

What plants work best?

Ground covers are supposed to minimize work, not make more, so stick with plants that are proven performers in your climate. There are lots of options beyond "the big three" English ivy, Japanese pachysandra and Periwinkle or Vinca (though due to the open growing nature of Vinca it is poor at preventing sunlight from reaching the soil and thus allows more weeds to penetrate it during the 8 to 10 years it takes before it established a thick light smothering cover) such as these plants:

Ferns - Some of which have deeply cut, dark green fronds and prefer partial to full shade

Hostas – Many have bold, broad, strap-like to heart-shaped leaves and they come in a wide range of sizes, colors and markings again prefer partial to full shade.

Sedums – Come in a range of sizes some hug the ground, others reach about 6-inches tall and a few can grow several feet tall! These prefer full sun to partial shade.

Creeping Jenny (Lysimachia) - is exceptionally vigorous, and may try to invade your lawn though mowing does restrain it somewhat. Its beautiful yellow flowers are a real bonus! It grow in everything from full sun to partial shade.

Sedges (a/k/a/ Carex - which are related to grasses) and the low growing ornamental grasses (Pennisetum, Sporobolus, Helictotrichon, Hakonechloa, Festuca, etc.) are great picks as Deer rarely even taste them let alone eat them, once established are very drought resistant and require almost no care. Depending on the selection you make they are perfect for everything from deep shade to the hottest driest sunniest location you have!

Non-Evergreen covers such as Plumbago (Ceratostigma) work great too! Plumbago has the advantage of not only being very aggressive and covers large areas quickly, but its fall scarlet

color is absolutely fantastic! This fall color often coming at the end of the time these plants are producing their stunning deep blue flowers! Its one of my favorites. It grows in full sun to medium deep shade!

Obviously I can help you with these projects. So feel free to call me at 443-420-1335!