

# Alison Böckh

## GARDEN DESIGN



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## THE NEWSLETTER

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### Five best plants for ground cover in the shade

Gardeners love a bit of jargon, bandying about technical horticultural terms with a smattering of botanical Latin thrown in for the initiated. As a designer this habit has its uses if not over done - clients are more inclined to think you're an expert.

But one term is particularly baffling despite being descriptive – *ground cover*.

No, it doesn't mean *anything* covering the ground - such as astro-turf, tarmac, weed membrane, nor would I include lawn. So what *does* it mean?

In my book it means any plant that covers these criteria – fairly low growing, covers the ground permanently, by which I mean evergreen (or mostly) and last but not least – *supresses weeds*.

Naturally such a plant is vital in the garden designer's arsenal in providing 'year round interest' and low maintenance planting schemes.

This time of year in the UK is a bit bleak in the garden viewed from the house – sizeable gaps have appeared in the borders, last year's leaves are still waiting to be cleared. Shaded areas can be particularly tricky – so below are five really useful plants for shady corners and bare borders.

**Pachysandra terminalis** - This is a tough spreading evergreen with small sprays of subtle creamy flowers. But it's the glossy green leaves that spread by underground stems that give a vigorous carpet of green through which no weed would dare show its head— perfect under shrubs or at the front of shaded borders. A damp heavy soil is no deterrent – and a dry spot under trees suits it just as well. A must have.



**Epimedium versicolour 'Sulphereum'** – of the many Epimediums this is probably the best for covering a sizeable patch up to 2 feet across- and the prettiest too. Delicate little Turk's Cap lily flowers of pale yellow shyly appear from beneath its stunning leaves. In fact, it's my favourite which is why it forms the background on my website. Dry shade suits it best and it remains green for all but a couple of weeks in later winter when you can shear off the leaves before the new growth arrives in spring. Perfect.



**Euphorbia amygdaloides robbiae** – one of the many spurges with milky sap that can irritate the skin. But I will tolerate that for its shade loving, spreading capability with bold whorls of leaves that give rise to tall bright lime green bracts early in the year. By summer these are looking a bit tatty and can be cut down to the base. Happy in sun but just as well in dry dense shade. Mind the sap.



**Geranium macrorhizum** is not the most decorative of the many Geranium hybrids available but its aromatic leaves that spread by its snake like rhizomes have a weed suppressing ability bar none. By autumn it becomes a bit sparser but spring brings a fresh flush of brilliant green leaves and uncompromisingly bright pink flowers, pretty in any spring garden. There is an even more robust white variety 'Album' with palest pinky flowers and reddish calyces. Like most Geraniums, it's happily unfussy about soil and can cope with shade and dappled sunlight.



**Carex 'Ice dance'** – This, like many Carex species being a sedge, not a true grass, is a lover of damp places and why I plant it a lot in damp Devon gardens. It spreads slowly but willingly and creates shaggy swathes of bright strappy leaves outcompeting all comers. Its variegated leaves brighten dark, awkward corners and around shrubs, looking particularly fine in modern, contemporary settings.



All of the above will fulfil their purpose if planted in groups of 3 or 5 – or even 7 if you're feeling bold – that way they will have a chance to establish and take hold of the territory you gift them, remaining green and stalwart against weeds all year round.

And in other news...

January started in a rush of enquiries – at one point I was seeing 3 properties next door to each other in the same street! But a few good projects are under way – plus gardens from last year that are preparing for tree planting.

There are still a couple of months of the bare root tree planting season left so if you're thinking of a new tree now is the time – give me a call.

**Betula pubescens** - Downy Birch – good for wet sites, height to 10- 20 metres.

