

THREE GROUNDCOVERS - ONE FOR SHADE; TWO FOR SUN

By Ralph E. Mitchell

Groundcovers are always in demand as we attempt to cover landscape space with something other than turfgrass. Groundcovers reduce labor (mowing) and inputs such as fertilizer and water that grass often regularly requires. Bottom-line, groundcovers fill in landscape areas with low-maintenance color and/or texture. Three good groundcovers available to try are Pothos for shade, and the Beach Sunflower and a special type of Natal Plum for full sun.

Pothos or Golden Pothos is a vining tropical plant with green and yellow heart-shaped leaves. While more commonly seen in hanging baskets as a houseplant, Golden Pothos will make a good groundcover in shaded areas such as might be found under pines, palms or oaks. As an added feature, Pothos will often climb up course-barked trees and develop into a larger plant with mature leaves up to 18 inches long. With bright green and yellow leaves, this plant really brightens up a dark area. Sensitive to frost, the Golden Pothos will have some protection under the cover of trees. Pothos grow best in well-drained, rich soil in diffuse light to deep shade. Avoid planting Pothos in shrub areas as this vine will grow through the branches into a tangled mess. There are a few color varieties to choose from including Marble Queen which has white leaves mixed with green and grey-green, and Tricolor with green leaves streaked with yellow, cream and pale green. One additional cultivar called Wilcoxii is colorfully arrayed with

well-defined zones of variegated green and white.

The Beach Sunflower is becoming more popular in our area as it is hard to beat as a perennial groundcover. With a height generally of around two-feet or less, the Beach Sunflower is a natural subject for full-sun areas where drought tolerance is a must. In fact, too much irrigation will cause this plant to slow its growth or even decline. Filling an area via underground runners, the Beach Sunflower is known to quickly spread. Butterflies love the three-inch yellow flowers on this fast-growing, densely spreading plant. I once had a single plant that grew to about twelve feet wide! Adding to the high drought tolerance, the Beach Sunflower, as its name implies, has good salt tolerance.

Although pretty much a perennial in our area, if the Beach Sunflower is damaged by frost, it will reseed itself very quickly. In addition, cuttings will root fairly quickly if you wish to propagate this plant. While mostly available as a pale yellow flower with a purple-brown center, you may also be able to find various cultivars in copper-red, pink, purple, orange, red, and brown.

One final groundcover suitable for sunny areas is the Natal Plum or Carissa. Highly drought tolerant and adaptable to tolerate salt, the Natal Plum is an evergreen shrub with oval leaves, spines, fragrant white flowers and edible red, plum-like fruit that tastes like cranberries. The original plant known as *Carissa grandiflora* is a bit too tall to qualify for a groundcover as it

grows up to six feet. However, as with many plants, interesting cultivars have been discovered that fit particular needs. Dwarf cultivars of Carissa such as Green Carpet, Horizontalis and Prostrata make excellent groundcovers. They may be difficult to locate, so ask about their

availability at local garden centers or search the Internet for planting stock.

Groundcovers make good choices where lawn areas need to be reduced or are inappropriate.

For more information on all types of groundcovers, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm until 4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our Plant Clinics are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** every Thursday from 9:00am until 11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 9:00am until 12:00pm every Monday.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of each month from 1:00pm until 3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of each month from 1:00pm until 4:00pm.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by e-mail at Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com. You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener from 1:00pm until 4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by e-mail Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com.

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resources:

Gilman, E. F. (1999) Epipremnum aureum. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.

Gilman, E. F. (1999) Helianthus deilis. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.

Gilman, E. F. (2007) Carissa grandiflora, Natal Plum, Common Carissa. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.