As its name implies, a groundcover is just that—a plant that covers the ground. Depending on one’s point of view a groundcover could be almost any plant imaginable. When we travel high above the earth’s surface in an airplane, for example, large trees become ground covers. They form dense canopies and they certainly cover the ground. But for the purposes of this discussion we’ll define a groundcover as primarily low-growing (less than knee-high) plants that tend to spread densely just above the ground and help prevent soil erosion.

Turfgrass is by far the most dominating groundcover in our communities. It’s estimated that we’re approaching 50 million acres of turfgrass in the United States (an area the size of Alabama). People like having a living carpet of green radiating from their homes, businesses and public places. Turfgrass is important for more than its carpet-like looks as there really is no better surface for sports, kite flying, dog chasing, picnicking, tent camping and numerous other outdoor activities. But turfgrass is also expensive to maintain and requires many inputs, including significant amounts of water, fertilizer, pesticides and time, to be kept at the weed-free lushness we’ve come to expect. A cascade of negative impacts on trees and other landscape plants is often seen where turfgrass is fussed over. And turfgrass is rarely a good choice for shade.

Surely we can move beyond turfgrass and incorporate other groundcovers—with a wider range of uses and benefits—into the landscape. Such groundcovers can have a myriad of uses and benefits. They help crowd out weeds, shade and cool the soil surface, conserve soil moisture and generally require less effort. When carefully selected and planted, they also help build the organic nature of our soils and can greatly improve landscape biodiversity, including serving as food and nectar sources for a variety of important insects and other pollinators. In addition to adding visual appeal, groundcovers don’t need regular mowing and can be used on slopes where mowing is impractical.

Under and around trees and other landscape plantings, groundcovers can be thought of as living mulch. Just as mulch helps shade the ground, conserve moisture and prevent weeds, groundcovers can serve the same purpose. And unlike mulch, groundcovers don’t need to be frequently reapplied. Good groundcovers for shade or partly shaded areas include lady’s mantle (*Alchemilla*), bergenia, plumbago, barren strawberry, sweet woodruff, cranesbill, deadnettle and vinca, among others. For those who want to use native plants, try wild ginger, various species of sedge (*Carex*), coralbells, Jacob’s ladder, solomon’s seal, boneset, celandine poppy, foamflower and meadow anemone.

In sunny areas, we have many turfgrass alternatives to use as groundcovers. A relatively simple solution would be a mix of yarrow and catmint. Such a planting could be occasionally mowed back to reinvigorate it. Other options include salvia, sedum, geranium, lambs’ ears, basket-of-gold and many others. For those who want natives (and we think you should!) our prairie plants shine—buffalograss, sideoats grama, blue grama, aster, yarrow, mist flower, rudbeckia, goldenpea, spiderwort, poppy mallow and many others. When possible, combine several species together in a planting to improve biodiversity and to gain some resiliency against diseases and weather events.