

CAPE COVERS

Blanket the ground with a living floral carpet

There is never a good time for a garden to be without a comprehensive cover of foliage blanketing the ground. Whether faced with a cold winter, fierce summer sun, drought, wind, or torrential rains, the right plant cover can keep the garden intact, and add beauty and year-round interest while performing these duties. In many ways they are the problem solvers of the garden, spreading out where nothing else will grow, tucking neatly into the narrow gap between pavers, providing the answer to a high-maintenance lawn and steep slopes, and covering bare patches beneath trees or in flower beds. Groundcovers help to link together the individual plants within the bed, as well as the segmented areas of the garden. And an outdoor space filled with a variety of gorgeous plants is a lot more appealing than one boasting an expanse of lawn, bark chip and paving.

The low-growing plants with a spreading habit, often those that root from runners are usually labelled as groundcovers, but most sub-shrubs and small perennials of this type are also effective soil protectors. The prime requisite for this role are plants that provide rapid, dense cover that shades the ground and suppresses weeds.

Plant types to use:

Prostrate shrubs

Perennials – herbaceous and evergreen

Creeping, suckering, spreading and thicket-forming

Spreading plants can fill space swiftly, easing the strain on your pocket, adding quick, attractive seasonal colour, provide hiding places for tiny creatures, and offer up pollen and nectar to pollinators. Give them a light trim or deadhead to keep the flush of flowers coming, but do leave some seeds for wildlife.

Felicia amelloides – blue and white: Blue Marguerite

There is little to rival this particular shade of blue around the garden, and its success, popularity, and worldwide fame have been immortalised by the philately world, first appearing on a South African postage stamp in 2003. Performing best in the day-long sun it retains a soft, mounding form well suited to border edges, banks, and rockeries, or spread throughout the bed. Make use of this mounding habit to create a textural interest around spiky plants as a change to a typical expansive sweep of cover. Mature height is 30 – 45 cm x 50 cm, its rapid growth ensuring first season flowering from spring to autumn. The Blue Marguerite thrives in windy places, and sandy soils, is water-wise and tolerates a moderate frost. The white form, 'Alba' is a most attractive slightly smaller cultivar.

Chaenostoma cordatum – Previously *Sutera cordata*: Trailing Phlox:

Pronounced Kee-nos-toma.

The Trailing Phlox a magical groundcover that performs beautifully in both sun and shade, inland, and coastal. It hugs the ground forming low mounds of up to 300 mm, and will spread to cover a space of equal width to 500 mm. Single white flowers with a characteristic yellow centre, grow in the leaf axil, often tucked among the leaves. There are often a few flowers seen year-round, but the main flowering season is spring. Give plants a light trim between flowering times. Plants do better when given some shade in hot, dry areas; the Trailing Phlox is not especially water-wise and is also sensitive to frost. Many cultivars are available in nurseries, one of the prettiest with flowers in pale pink. *Chaenostoma* spreads by rooting stems. Bees pollinate the flowers

Chaetacanthus setiger – Dyschoriste setigera: Fairy Stars.

The common name suggests the prettiest of plants covered year-round in bright star-like flowers, but this perennial is planted more for its foliage. Fairy Stars is a shade-loving groundcover thriving in light, partial (of half-day), to dappled shade, and, when conditions are right, forms dense cover with slightly egg-shaped (obovate), dark green leaves. Each plant grows to a maximum height of 300 mm and a spread of 600 mm. Tiny, 5-petaled white flowers are scattered over the foliage from August to January. Distribution: Western and Eastern Cape, KZN, and moving inland to the Free State, Gauteng, Limpopo, and North-West Province. Bees, butterflies, and other insects are attracted to the flowers. A water-wise plant for banks, beneath shrubs, and is most effective around pavers. Fairy Stars roots easily where stems touch the soil or propagate from slips.

Helichrysum teretifolium:

This strongly textured perennial is a must have for coastal gardens from the Western and Eastern Cape, and along the south coast of KZN up to Durban. Short, rigid, needle-shaped leaves cover the entire length of the long, woody stems. Depending on the growing conditions, the form is either straggling or compact. This most attractive plant grows to 45 cm and adds attractive texture when planted in the front of the bed or as it creeps among the other companions in the arrangement. In my garden, it looks particularly good tucked around a spread of *Aloe chabaudii*. It enjoys hot, dry conditions, well-draining soils (found on sand dunes, it will thrive in sandy conditions) and good air movement. I've tried it up here in Gillitts, but it is dying off from the centre out, though we have had a season's rain in just a few weeks. Flower heads are made up of many tiny, creamy-white bouquets; some show a blush of pink on the outer bract. Flowering occurs from July to November. Source one of these lovely plants, and grow the rest from seed. Albany Thicket, Fynbos, Grassland,

Indian Ocean Coastal Belt. It helps to stabilise dunes and grows on sandy flats and mountain slopes often in dense stands.

Arctotis species:

Both original species and the many hybrids are low-water-use plants and are very successful groundcovers in free-draining soils. There are a variety of forms from clumping to trailing and come in such a range of colours to suit every gardener's palette. They flower through spring and summer depending on the species chosen, and are quite unfussy, growing in a variety of situations as long as the soil drains well. In humid climates, they do best with good air movement around the foliage.

Cotula sericea:

Buttons, Knoppies, or Silky Cotula, is one of the most charming of our groundcover selection. This versatile and delightful evergreen groundcover forms soft, feathery mounds in sun or semi-shade; plants grow between 20–40 mm tall but are more commonly low-growing with a spreading habit. Bright sun-yellow flowers are on show for most of the year with the main flush from spring to mid-summer. These stand well above the attractive feathery grey-green leaves. A plant for coastal and inland gardens the Silky Cotula has moderate water needs and does seem to prefer regular watering regime. Easily propagated from cuttings, plants spread rapidly by rooting where stems touch the ground. Rooted cuttings must be kept moist for a few days. While originating along the Eastern Cape coast from Mossel Bay to East London, it does very well in both summer and winter rainfall regions. Flowers attract pollinators.

Scabiosa africana/ incisa /columbaria /hybrids: Cape Scabious or Pincushion.

There are many hybrids available of our most successful SA species, and the Scabiosa family is no exception. *S. africana* is a Western Cape endemic from the Fynbos habitat. It has large, mauve flowers and grey-green leaves that form attractive soil-protecting. Flowers dance gleefully far above the leaves, quite delightful when mixed with a variety of other fynbos species. Flowering covers spring to early summer, and the rather bristly seed heads that follow are attractive enough to keep and provide food and nesting materials for wildlife. Flowers are also long-lasting when picked for the vase. Plant in sunny to semi-shade situations. Don't overdo the compost and fertiliser with this species, and cut old woody plants right back; they will shoot from the base.

S. incisa, also a W. Cape endemic, is a stronger plant than *S. africana*, hailing from the Bokbaai to Grahamstown regions, and it flowers in spring. The species, *S. columbaria*, is the most widespread of the genus, occurring throughout much of Africa - Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, and North West.

This species is common in grasslands along the KZN South Coast, as well as inland. It grows to about 70 cm tall and prefers little compost and fertiliser if any at all.

Falkia repens - White Carpet.

A delightful, ground-hugging perennial with dense, soft, mat-forming foliage and pale pink buttercup-style flowers that fade to white. Flowering season is short, from September to December, but for the rest of the year, it provides a most attractive textured cover. Plants never grow more than 5 to 10 cm and is an excellent choice to replace lawn where there is no foot traffic. A versatile groundcover for both sun and shade, dry or moist conditions. A most intriguing behaviour of this plant, according to the SANBI site, is the dispersal of the seed; seeds are buried by the plant itself when the flower stalk droops down to the ground after flowering, and it is in the soil that the fruits develop. Although many gardeners grow it in the shade, I have seen clumps of this attractive plant thrive on a dry, sunny slope in Kloof. Clumps can be divided every 3 – 4 years to keep growth strong and to multiply your stock of them.

Agapanthus africanus - Dwarf Agapanthus

This perennial is the smaller cousin to the world-famous *Agapanthus praecox* (they feature in countless American and Australian TV shows,) and is an outstanding water-wise perennial with roots that are especially good at holding the soil on slopes. The Dwarf Agapanthus thrives in full sun and partial shade, but just make sure the soil drains freely – and, for those with acid soils, this perennial is a good choice. Do not overwater, particularly in the summer rainfall region. There are numerous hybrids available, but you cannot go wrong with a mix of the original blue and white species. Flowering season is from December to February. This plant battles with a certain caterpillar and with rot in the humid, wet summers of the east of the country. 35 x 35 cm. *A. africanus*, according to SANBI, was the first of the genus to be collected in South Africa; first described in 1679, taxonomists initially placed this species within the Hyacinth family.

Gazania rigens - Trailing Gazania

I love this groundcover, both the green and grey-leaved varieties. Many see the trailing Gazanias as just an old standby, to use where nothing else will. It is tough; I've seen it flower for much of the year in hot, humid climates, scrambling with happy intent to fill the available space, and thrive in the dry, shallow soils of a traffic circle where it shrugs off car fumes, and the daily muck kicked up from the roadside. And still, the cheerful yellow or cream daisies keep on showing up for your pleasure. There will be the odd bare spot as a section dies off; simply pop in another plant and the gap will soon be filled. The only soil the Gazanias do not relish is clay.