



Oak leaf ficus spreads low to the ground. **Kenneth Setzer** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

HOME & GARDEN

## When grass or gravel won't do, these plants are easy and attractive ground cover



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Finding the right plants for ground cover is tricky. At its most basic, ground cover needs to block enough of the bare soil to discourage weeds, while simultaneously requiring minimal maintenance. The cover should spread to create a mat, but not become invasive. If it flowers or becomes a focal point, so much the better.

Ground covers are often also subject to the least hospitable yard areas and may have to tolerate trampling if they are in areas of foot traffic, midday sun, and roof runoff from storms.

Here are some favorite ground covers you might consider.

- **Rain lilies, *Zephyranthes* sp.:** I once found some dark green, grass-like leaves in a pot containing a large cactus. Upon learning it was a rain lily and grew from a bulb, I dug it up and gave it its own pot. It's since reproduced to hundreds of plants, all from that single bulb. The flowers appear in late spring and are spectacular, but otherwise the foliage looks like a small fountain of grass. My friend uses them as fill and ground cover, which made me realize they can be set free from a pot. I've since planted the bulbs in open areas and along walkways.

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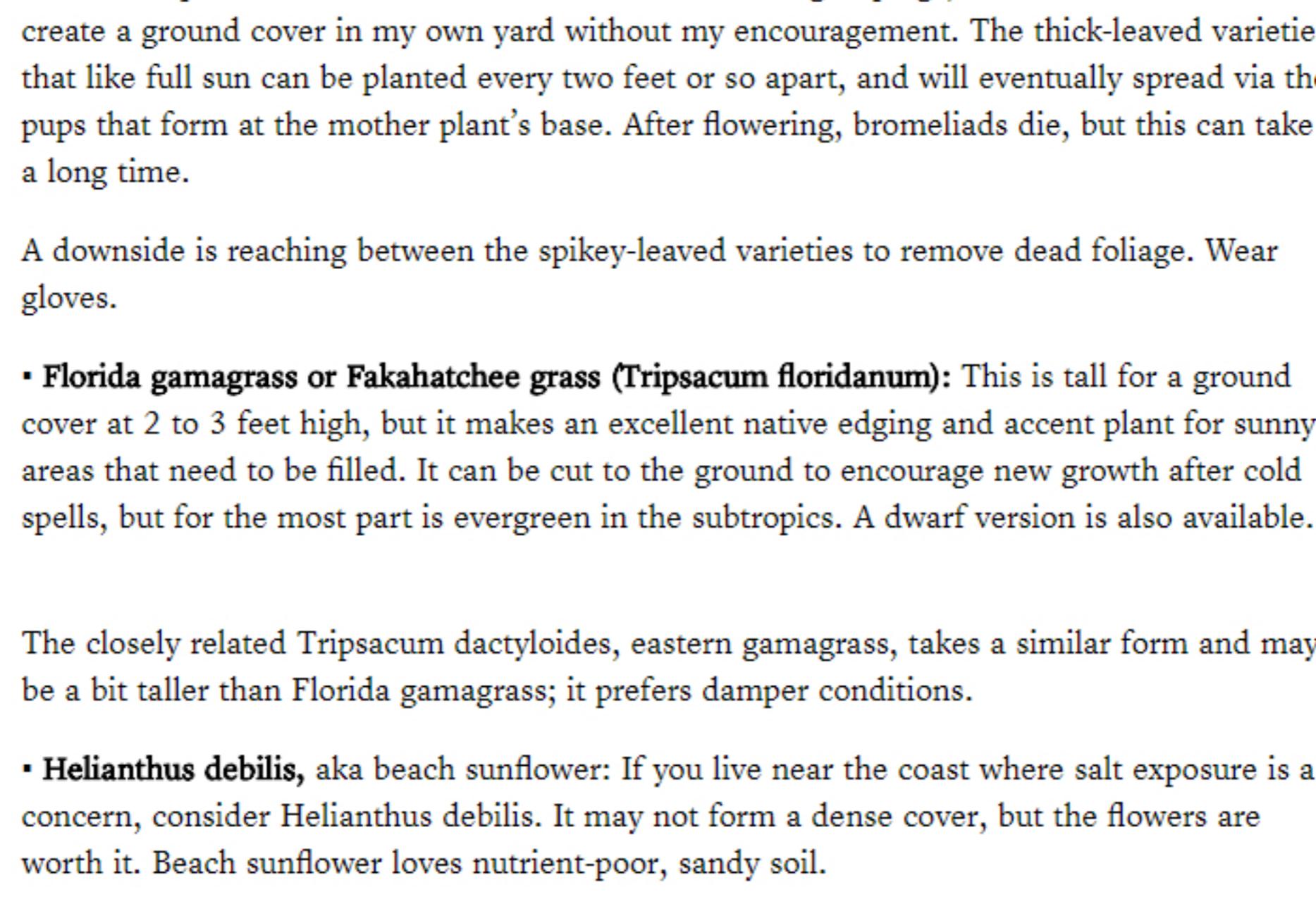
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**Downside:** Like many plants growing from bulbs, it survives lean times by seeming to disappear, storing energy in its underground bulb, but it always comes back. In cultivation the foliage tends to endure longer with irrigation. For a large expanse, rain lilies might not offer the best consistent coverage but make attractive, unexpected edging plants.



Rain lilies can form showy, flowering groundcover.

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- **Bromeliads:** You might not consider bromeliads for ground cover, but they form the ideal low mat required. Fairchild has lots of dense bromeliad groupings, and I've seen bromeliads create a ground cover in my own yard without my encouragement. The thick-leaved varieties that like full sun can be planted every two feet or so apart, and will eventually spread via the pups that form at the mother plant's base. After flowering, bromeliads die, but this can take a long time.

A downside is reaching between the spiky-leaved varieties to remove dead foliage. Wear gloves.

- **Florida gamagrass or Fakahatchee grass (*Tripsacum floridanum*):** This is tall for a ground cover at 2 to 3 feet high, but it makes an excellent native edging and accent plant for sunny areas that need to be filled. It can be cut to the ground to encourage new growth after cold spells, but for the most part is evergreen in the subtropics. A dwarf version is also available.

The closely related *Tripsacum dactyloides*, eastern gamagrass, takes a similar form and may be a bit taller than Florida gamagrass; it prefers damper conditions.

- **Helianthus debilis**, aka beach sunflower: If you live near the coast where salt exposure is a concern, consider *Helianthus debilis*. It may not form a dense cover, but the flowers are worth it. Beach sunflower loves nutrient-poor, sandy soil.



Popular, low-maintenance liriope fills a space and will

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- **Liriope muscari** is an old favorite; at Fairchild, there are three varieties, including a variegated version. Liriope sports a small fountain of dark green blades and flowers in a purple spike. Its leaves even take on a metallic sheen to my eye. But I'm not telling you anything new; it can be found everywhere from private homes to mall parking lot islands and medians. Its ease of cultivation is a factor in its ubiquitousness, making it inexpensive for covering large areas.

- **Formosan creeping fig, *Ficus vaccinoides*:** How amazing that the genus *Ficus* offers plants from enormous trees (the champion strangler fig grows right here in Miami) right down to this scrambling ground cover with tiny, deep green leaves. This one is smaller than those of *Ficus pumila*; its figs look like tiny blueberries. An interesting, unexpected cover for smaller areas where the tiny foliage won't get lost.

Another one, *Ficus montana* or oak leaf fig, also hugs the ground as it creeps along and spreads to form a mat.

Remarkably, it prefers shade. It's a challenge to find a shade-loving plant that won't sizzle in unexpected sun exposure like a vampire, but oak leaf fig scrambles into direct sun along paths at Fairchild, and thrives. In poking around a colony of it to take photos for this article, I discovered it had produced the most charming tiny figs. Both *Ficus* species stay very close to the ground.



Some bromeliads form thickets that block out weeds. **Kenneth Setzer** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden