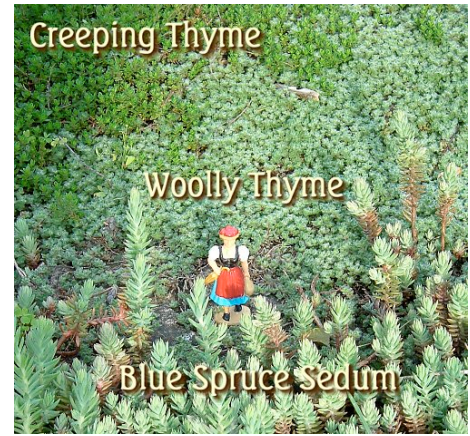


## Groundcovers and other Plants for Garden Railroads

by Paul D. Race

Groundcovers and other plants help keep your garden railroad from being overcome with weeds, or turning into mud on wet days. Many offer the additional benefit of keeping your garden attractive even when everything else is dormant or frozen off to the ground.



### Basic Choices

For garden railroading, groundcovers should include anything that covers the ground, is reasonably low maintenance, and stays low enough not to hide your railroad and accessories. These include:

- Lawn grass, which, in sections large enough to mow, is pretty easy to maintain, after all
- Inorganic ground covers like mulch and gravel
  - If you use mulch against your house or garage, make certain it is insect-resistant. Also, you will need to replenish it (or at least provide a new “top coat”) at least once a year.
  - If you use gravel, consider placing it over high-quality landscaping fabric or some other barrier that will keep it from becoming “one with the soil” (and part of the problem) eventually.
- Organic ground covers, especially low-growing groundcovers with tiny leaves or needles, such as:
  - Creeping and Woolly Thyme
  - Acre, Stubby Fingers, and Blue Spruce Sedum
  - Other perennials and plants may be helpful, even if they’re not technically groundcovers.

### Preparing (Or Not) The Planting Site

- You want to give your plants something to grow on, but you don’t really want explosive growth, so don’t stress over the quality of soil in your garden railroad. Relatively poor soil that you can fertilize at first is better than great soil that will turn slow-spreading groundcovers into kudzu.

### Choosing Groundcovers

- Look for plants with a very low growth pattern. As an example, Elfin Thyme stands in for lawns on many Ohio garden railroads. If the label says it gets up to six inches, remember to plant it where it would bury your houses or accessories.
- Thymes do better on slopes than on low-lying flat areas where they might get oversoaked.
- Sedums do well just about anywhere that has seasons.
- Visit garden railroads in your area to see what folks are using with success.
- Avoid groundcovers that spread by shooting out long runners that may “leapfrog” your buildings.
- Other plants, such as Threadleaf Coreopsis may fill in areas that don’t need a low-growing groundcover. Blue Rug Juniper is good for an area you never want to use for anything else.

### Planting and Cultivating Groundcovers

- Thymes and many other useful groundcovers spread by sending out branches that root away from the main root. Plant store-bought thymes according to the instructions that came with them and wait, maybe a year or two before they really start to spread. To get new starts, start at the outside edge of a spreading plant, and feel inward, underneath until you come to a place that has rooted away from the original root. Clip that branch between the secondary root and the first root. Wherever you plant your start, make certain all of the root is under the soil, some of the leaves are showing, and that you keep it moist for the first couple of weeks (more if you have a drought.)
- Sedums are way easier to spread. Break off a branch, stick one end into the ground, and keep moist. Also, remember that, though sedums branch upward, they spread downward, so if you want a hill covered with sedum, start at the top.
- If you choose a plant that’s not technically a groundcover, follow the instructions that come with it. Also, consider having a natural barrier to keep it from spreading where you don’t want it.