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How to Grow and Care for Pachysandra



Pachysandra terminalis grows in a shady garden in summertime.

Photo Credit: photoPou

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| Botanical Name: | Pachysandra spp. |
| Plant Type: | Ground cover |
| Sun | Shade |

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Planting, growing, and caring for Japanese Pachysandra

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: April 14, 2025



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A rapid spreader, pachysandra offers a carpet of green where other plants struggle to grow. An evergreen perennial, it's often used as a groundcover. Native types provide an alternative to the sometimes invasive Japanese pachysandra, also called Japanese spurge. Learn how to plant, grow, and care for pachysandras.

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About Pachysandra

Pachysandra is an evergreen perennial herb in the Boxwood family (*Buxaceae*). It is a popular groundcover plant for landscaping due to its shade tolerance and rapid growth through underground stems and roots. It sports leathery, dark green, toothed leaves about 2 to 4 inches long that alternate around a stem. In spring, small greenish-white flowers produce

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Hardy in USDA zones 4-9, sometimes even in zone 3, this plant likes moist, well-drained, acidic soil and thrives in partial to full shade. They are deer-resistant and tough.



Japanese pachysandra flowers blooming in water. Credit: Erik Agar

Like many groundcovers, pachysandras spread via underground rhizomes, and they can do so quickly (the reason they are loved as groundcovers). Aggressive spreading and their ability to grow in the shade where other plants struggle is what can get pachysandra in trouble. In particular, *Pachysandra terminalis**, or Japanese pachysandra (also known as Japanese spurge), was heavily used in the landscape for years.

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However, pachysandra is less likely to spread when kept in beds and town. It doesn't spread by wind, so keeping it in check in a neat and edged garden bed is doable. It does make a beautiful green groundcover in problem areas. It is quite effective as a living mulch, keeping weeds down and providing a lush, low-green border.

Note: This plant has been reported to be invasive in VA and DC. Check your state invasive lists for updates.

If the idea of a lush bed appeals to you, consider the native pachysandra (P. procumbens) to find many of the same characteristics without worries about

- [How to Grow Liriope: The Complete Plant Guide](#)
- [How to Grow Mountain Laurel \(Kalmia latifolia\)](#)
- [How to Grow & Care for Ajuga Groundcover](#)

PLANTING

These groundcovers are best suited for partial to full shade. [They prefer moist, acidic soil](#) and thrive in a pH of less than 6.0. They'll grow in clay soils as long as there is some drainage.

Pachysandras truly love the shade and, once established, are fairly drought-tolerant. They like well-drained soil with organic material and even moisture.

Pachysandras make a great [alternative to grass](#), covering hard-to-control areas like shaded slopes or places under trees where grass won't grow.

When to Plant Pachysandra

Plant pachysandra in spring, after the last frosts have passed, or in autumn, about a month before the first fall frosts arrive. If your plants arrived looking a bit under the weather after shipping (and are in containers), give them a bit of pampering on the deck before subjecting them to the rigors of transplanting. If they arrive bare-root, plant them as soon as possible.

How to Plant Pachysandra

Pachysandras can be purchased as small individual plants or in bulk as rooted plugs ready to tuck into your soil. To establish a ground cover, space each plant about 8-12 inches from the next in a grid. Use stakes and string to lay out larger areas. For planting only a few in a small bed, space them 2-3 handwidths apart, depending on the size of your paws.

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- Prepare the bed or site, remove all sod, loosen the soil, and work in a two-inch layer of compost.
- At each planting location, prepare a hole twice the diameter of the plant's container and a bit deeper. For plugs, a bulb planter may work quite well.
- Test fit the pachysandra in the hole, adding soil until the top of the root ball is level with the soil surface.
- Snugly tuck the plant in, refilling the hole with the soil you removed. Use light but firm pressure to avoid air pockets around the roots.
- Water thoroughly after planting and weekly if it has not rained until the end of the first season.
- Apply mulch to minimize weeds down and keep the soil moist.

GROWING

Pachysandras are commonly planted relatively close together to help them cover the ground and begin self-mulching. Once they have closed the canopy, they won't need much care.

- During the first year, water weekly in the summer if rainfall is less than 1 inch.
- Mulch around new plantings to keep weeds down and soil moisture up. After they grow into each other, mulching will be unnecessary.
- Apply a slow-release fertilizer annually in springtime once new growth has begun.
- Pachysandra is spread by rhizomes, and a bare spot can be filled in by dividing an existing thick spot and transplanting. Just dig up a piece and move it.
- Trim off any rhizomes or new sprouts outside the bed to keep the non-native pachysandra under control.
- Take care to rake out leaf and plant debris to improve air circulation and

ducing disease activity.

Pruning Pachysandra

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Pachysandra doesn't need pruning like an upright shrub but will benefit from shearing now and then to renew green growth and open up the plants. Prune in late winter or early spring using sharp hedge shears and gently rake off the trimmed stems.

Take care where you pile them, as trimmings may root in a compost pile and begin making their jailbreak.

Controlling Pachysandra

If you or a prior homeowner allowed pachysandra to spread too far, there are several options for control:

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- Manually hand pulling is successful, then cover the area with cardboard/tarp/mulch.
- Controlled burning. Follow local regulations.
- Chemical, with herbicides. Follow label and state requirements. Even parks will do this in very targeted treatments if necessary.

Types

- ‘Green Carpet’ (*P. terminalis*) lives up to its name. It’s hardy in USDA zones 4-9 and grows slightly shorter, reaching about a foot tall and 18 inches wide at maturity.
- ‘Green Sheen’ (*P. terminalis*) is similar to the standard pachysandra but has glossier leaves that look freshly wet even when dry.
- Allegheny pachysandra is a native

retains all the shade-loving character-
istics and is easy to care for.



Alleghenny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*) blossoms, with leaves from previous season. native to the southeastern U.S. Credit: Gerry Bishop

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PESTS/DISEASES

leaves, use a horticultural oil spray in the spring, summer & fall.

- **Spider mites**: If you see dotted leaves or light webbing on the leaf underside, use a horticultural oil spray; apply at 1-week intervals between sprays.
- **Volutella blight**: If you see brownish rings on the leaves or brown cankers on stems, your plants have the Volutella fungus. This is a tough one. Remove affected pachysandra manually. Fertilize with a holly tone and water in. Do NOT water from above; use soaker hoses. Apply an organic fungicide beginning at spring bud break (for example, Serenade).
- **Yellowing leaves**: This happens in full sun; these are shade plants.

WIT AND WISDOM

- Although pachysandra is not on the ASPCA's list of plants considered toxic to pets, dogs can still experience gastrointestinal upset if they consume a lot of it. Keep Fido from eating it.

tions ideal for fungal pathogens and root rot. Rake off thick deposits of leaves to keep air circulation around the stems.

- Alternatives to pachysandra for shady locations include [Liriope](#), *Vinca minor*, and *Gaultheria*.

GARDENING

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Wilcox



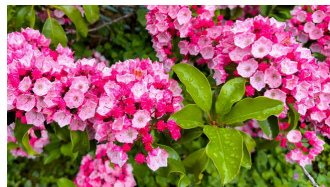
Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture.

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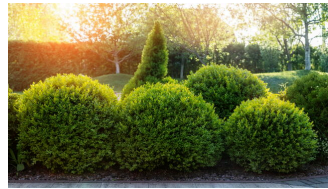
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