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# NWGN

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# Invest In Your Bank

## Planting Solutions for Hillsides, Slopes and Inclines

By Sally Credille and Don Eberly

Most of us imagine the perfect garden haven: one that is easy to access, level in terrain, and dappled with sunlight. Let's face it—this kind of garden occurs only in our dreams. In the real world, most of us have to contend with landscape conditions that are less than perfect. Perhaps the type of landscape that presents one of the greatest challenges to the Northwest gardener is a steep bank, slope, or hillside. These spaces are difficult to reach, erosion can be problematic, and too often it becomes—and remains—an eyesore rather than a place of beauty. If you are the frustrated resident of a sloping property, many horticulturists and landscape experts recommend that you "invest in your bank!"

"Conditions on a steep bank, slope, hillside or other incline are, unfortunately, not going to improve through neglect—a common situa-

tion easily seen along many residential streets in the region," says Fran Hopkins, president and founder of Under A Foot Plant Company, parent company of Stepables, in Salem, Oregon. "If anything, the area will deteriorate as wind and rain do inevitable damage, causing erosion and unsightly gullies." But with the right approach, your hilly eyesore can become a high point in your garden.

### Make the best investment

Perhaps the most important element in landscaping a steep hillside or bank is to choose the proper plants to support the area. The last thing you need is to invest time, money and effort installing plants that will not grow well and soon

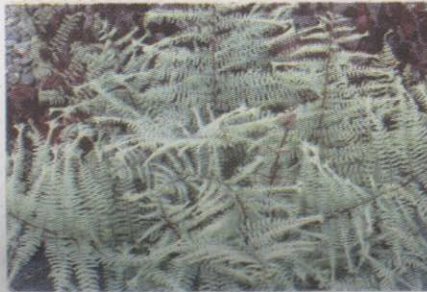


*Snow-in-summer (Cerastium tomentosum), above, creates a carpet of gray foliage and white flowers on a sunny bank. Thymus praecox 'Pseudolanuginosus', right, can handle steep slopes in full sun.*

*Photos courtesy Stepables*



*Athyrium 'Ocean's Fury', left, and Hakkonechloa 'Stripe it Rich', above, provide stability and beauty beneath trees and shrubs on the shady slope. Photos, Terra Nova Nurseries*



need replacing. Thus, it is important to choose plants with strong root systems and resilience in these challenging locales. Ideal plants will support the hillside, prevent soil movement—and look good. "A varied planting of a combination of shrubs, trees, perennials



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## Miss Snippy, continued

- **Fruits persist into winter:** becoming dangling mushballs if the birds won't eat them
- **Makes a delicious jam:** fruit the birds will eat before it can ripen

**Sprightly flavor:** prepare to pucker up (sometimes misspelled "spritely" in which case it tastes like elf)

So, go forth and order. Surely every nursery package that arrives on the doorstep adds years to a gardener's life. Just keep a close eye on any gentrified greens you invite home, or your proud potager will quickly become a rogues' gallery.

### Edible Weed Varieties:

- Lamb's-quarters (*Chenopodium album* and *gigantum*)
- Miner's lettuce (*Montia* sp., also known as *Claytonia perfoliata*)
- Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea sativa*)
- Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*, *sanguineus*, and *acetosa*)
- Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*)
- Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)
- Chickweed (*Stellaria media*)
- Shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*)

Caution and education are required when consuming any wild or unfamiliar plant. **NWGN**

## Miss Snippy's Gardening Glossary: Corms, tubers, rhizomes, tuberous roots and stolons

Poor plants—they have no fat! So how's a pretty posy supposed to store energy? One way is through bulbs and bulb-like structures such as corms, tubers, rhizomes and tuberous roots. Before the readers' eyes glaze over, Miss Snippy hastens to explain that most of these clever storage systems are simply variations of underground stems.

**Bulbs** (tulip and onion) are different from the others in that they are composed of scales formed of modified leaves. **Corms** (crocus and gladiolus) are solid, not scaled. **Tubers** (potatoes and tuberous begonias) can sprout roots and stems from many different sites on a single tuber. **Rhizomes** (calla and iris) have a main growth point at one end, with others appearing along the sides. **Tuberous roots** (dahlias and sweet potatoes) look and function like tubers, but are formed of root tissue, not stem tissue. **Stolons**, or runners, (strawberries and mint) are not storage devices, but wandering stems that creep along the ground, rooting as they go.

## Invest in Your Bank, Continued

and groundcovers is most effective and attractive," says Dan Heims, co-owner and president of Terra Nova Nurseries in Canby, Oregon. "The goal is to create layers of vegetation which block the force of rainfall on the soil."

Because accessibility on a steep hillside is usually difficult, gardeners should install plants that give the best show for the least amount of maintenance.

### Watch your assets grow

If you have a shady hillside, there are plenty of excellent plants to fit your needs. "The Japanese Forest Grass *Hakonechloa* 'Stripe It Rich' grows vigorously on banks and slopes which have partial sunlight," says Heims. "This short, deciduous grass grows only six inches tall while its creeping rhizomes firmly grasp the soil." It provides a great contrast with the foliage of ferns and shade-loving trees and shrubs. The leathery leaves of rhododendrons and magnolias are a perfect complement to the grass. Native sword ferns will thrive just as they do on hillsides in the wild.

In contrast, the sun-baked hillside is both a common and difficult area to plant. Never fear, there are plants that perform well under these conditions, too. The key is to make certain the plants you choose can tolerate heat and drought and develop a strong root system under these conditions. Dense

groundcovers like snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*) and creeping thyme (*Thymus*) are ideal fillers that will hold soil around the base of trees, shrubs and perennials. Both are also heat- and cold-tolerant. Both produce a carpet of colorful flowers each season. And when established, these groundcovers will require only occasional supplemental irrigation in summer.

Another good choice is the creeping perennial *Isotoma*, or blue star creeper. This low-growing gem packs a punch without requiring constant tending. It is easy to grow, blooms profusely, and makes an excellent addition to sloping property.

Hillside gardening can be challenging, but with the right plants and a little elbow grease this spring, a steep bank can become an attractive feature of your landscape. Instead of a slippery eyesore, a well-landscaped hillside brings viewing pleasure and improves property value.

### Choosing Plants

Spreading plants make good subjects for hillsides. Plants that you ordinarily wouldn't want in your garden because of their suckering habit can be an asset on a steep hillside, as their roots can stabilize soil. Avoid plants that are invasive weeds, like English ivy. **NWGN**