

Green from the ground up

Growers and designers share their top ground cover choices for any situation.

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

WHETHER THE CUSTOMERS are landscapers or retailers, the most sought-after characteristics in ground cover plants for pathways and walkways are the same.

People want low-growing, low-maintenance, drought-tolerant, evergreen, flowering, noninvasive, deer-tolerant, durable and — gaining in popularity — rabbit-resistant plants.

And it would be nice if they could also help with the dishes!

Customers expect a lot from these ground covers, and in fact, many of these attributes are out there, waiting to be had. That said, it's important to site the plants properly or they will not thrive well.

For instance, top sellers such as Irish moss (*Sagina subulata*) and Scotch moss (*Sagina subulata* 'Aurea') will

tolerate moderate foot traffic and are appreciated for their dense mats. They also love sun. However, when they are planted in an area that gets little or no water, a scorched, browning pathway will be the likely result.

Due to expense, commercial markets are not specifying ground covers for walkways and pathways very frequently. These markets tend to prefer hardscaping instead.

Homeowners, on the other hand, can be more adventuresome than landscapers and will consider ground covers for walkways, Crystal Cady of **Skagit**



Gardens (Mount Vernon, Washington) said. The open-mindedness only goes so far, though. These customers still typically want tried-and-true selections.

Here, we will talk about various ground cover options to consider — the popular as well as the unusual.

The royalty of pathway and walkway ground covers

How many different ways can you say *Thymus*? The mostly evergreen plants in this genus are the kings and queens of pathway and walkway ground covers.

Their only rivals may be *Mentha requienii* (Corsican mint), which customers appreciate for its tight mat and the fragrance when their feet run up against it, and *Pratia pedunculata* (blue star creeper), which customers use down whole pathways.

According to Dave McCoy of **McCoy Family Nursery Inc.** (North Plains, Oregon), *Thymus* is tough and takes foot traffic well once established.

Of the varieties out there, 'County Park' was mentioned a few times for its denser growth than the straight species. The flower is deep blue — like little stars — in May and June, with sporadic flowering thereafter, according to Grace Dinsdale, owner of **Blooming Nursery** (Cornelius, Oregon).

For dry areas with good drainage, Amy Whitworth of Plan-it Earth Design (Portland, Oregon) frequently opts for red creeping thyme (*Thymus praecox* 'Coccineus'). It is a favorite of Cady's as well. The flowers and the color are fabulous, Whitworth said, plus



Previous page: If dry conditions plague a landscape, *Thymus praecox* 'Coccineus' (top) or *Achillea* 'Brass Buttons' (bottom) are hearty options that don't require a lot of water.

PHOTO OF 'COCCINEUS' BY AMY WHITWORTH. PHOTO OF 'BRASS BUTTONS' COURTESY OF DEBORAH KELLY LANDSCAPE.

This page: *Sedum acre* 'Aureum' makes a durable, low-to-the-ground ground cover, standing up to heat and drought. PHOTO COURTESY OF SKAGIT GARDENS.

it attracts bees — so much so that she does not place it in installations where people are allergic to bee stings.

Thymus serpyllum 'Minus', aka Breckland thyme, tolerates drought, blooms well, is covered in flowers June through July and grows low to the ground. "It doesn't spread horribly," said McCoy. "It doesn't take a lot of care, and it's attractive."

Thymus serpyllum 'Elfin' (Elfin thyme) doesn't encroach on pavers as much as the popular *Thymus pseudolanuginosus* (woolly thyme), said Carolle Foucault at **T&L Nursery Inc.** (Redmond, Washington). It's tidy, more dwarf, drought-tolerant and tough. Plus, it releases fragrance when walked upon, and customers love the tiny pink summer flowers.

Thymus doerfleri 'Bressingham' is the winner in Dinsdale's driveway project. Stems

grow from a center rather than branching out, forming a dense middle that covers the grounds better and makes it a better weed suppressant. Plus, Dinsdale believes it is gorgeous when it blooms with bright pink flowers in early summer.

Sedums and succulents

The popularity of sedums may transcend ground covers, but low-growing ones are indeed being used for pathways.

"Any *Sedum*, period, has gotten popular," Cady said.

Sedum acre 'Aureum' in particular is a strong, low-growing evergreen forming a dense mat. It thrives in heat, tolerates drought, and glows with yellow spring foliage, Cady said.

Sedum oreganum, aka Oregon stonecrop, loves heat, tolerates drought and takes



light foot traffic. Where other plants might fry, this one stays strong and even attracts bees and butterflies with its little yellow flowers, Foucault said.

Sedum album 'Coral Carpet' and *Sedum album* var. *chloroticum* 'Baby Tears' are both hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 3-4 and have small white flowers with **>>**




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Gorgeous, pink-blooming *Thymus doerfleri* 'Bressingham' (top) and the six new *Delosperma* 'Jewel of Desert Garnet' selections (bottom) bring excitement with their bursts of color.

PHOTO OF 'BRESSINGHAM' COURTESY OF BLOOMING NURSERY.
PHOTO OF 'JEWEL OF DESERT GARNET' COURTESY OF SKAGIT GARDENS.

very small evergreen succulent foliage. Ryan Seely at **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery** (Aurora, Oregon) describes them as foot-traffic friendly and tight to the ground. 'Coral Carpet' is named for the color it turns in wintertime; 'Baby Tears' stays green year-round and does well in shade.

"*Sedum album* 'Orange Ice' is beautiful and stays low growing, and you can almost drive on it," McCoy said. "It's great between stepping stones, forms a dense mat, and it turns orange in the fall." It's drought-tolerant and even colors up when treated poorly.

For its tiny, delicate leaf, *Sedum hispanicum* var. *minus* is one of Whitworth's favorites, especially as it is not as prevalent as others. She also recommends *Sedum rupestre*

'Angelina' (Angelina stonecrop). It's a low-maintenance, mat-forming favorite that tolerates light shade, grows to 4-inches-tall and spreads 2-foot-wide with spiky yellow leaves that turn reddish-orange in cold weather.

The series of six *Delosperma* 'Jewel of Desert Garnet' selections (*Delosperma cooperi* PP 23471) are the best and newest ground covers, according to Cady. With color-bursting flowers on these very low-growing plants (4–6 inches in size), they are drought-tolerant and long-blooming from May through October.

She does not recommend them for staid gardens. "They are easy to use between stones," Cady said, "and good in rock gardens."

Veronica

Veronica livanensis (Turkish speedwell) is the lowest-growing of the *Veronica* selections that are available.

It has bright bluish-purple flowers that bloom for long periods like a carpet of blooms in early spring, attracting pollinators as a bonus. Cady has seen it used widely by landscapers because of its flat, prostrate nature, unlike *V. umbrosa* 'Georgia Blue', which is light and fluffy.

The flowers hold close to the foliage, and the plant can take hot sun.

The perfect grass

"My knee-jerk, go-to ground cover between stepping stones is dwarf mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Mondo')," Whitworth said. It boasts reliability, toughness, an evergreen nature and a grassy look that makes people smile. Plus, it takes sun and shade and a certain amount of drought.

Whitworth uses a drip line to get it established, and after that, waters only on an as-needed basis. It can be stepped on and is unfussy, other than needing a trim in spring after a bad winter.

Ophiopogon japonicus 'Nanus' can be appreciated for the same traits, according to Foucault. It is low-maintenance, evergreen, tidy, drought-tolerant and suitable for all exposures. "It's a slow grower, and grows between crevices," she said. "It can be a little bit more expensive, but its toughness makes it a good long-term investment."

For shade

Many of these plants will do OK in shade, but *Ajuga reptans* 'Valfreda' (*Ajuga* 'Chocolate Chip') is made for it, and is Whitworth's default for those situations. She said it's not as aggressive as other *ajugas*, has a more petite leaf and will tolerate some dryness. ➤➤



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Leptinella squalida 'Platt's Black' comes highly recommended by many growers as an excellent ground cover. PHOTO COURTESY OF T&L NURSERY.



Ajuga reptans 'Pink Lightning' PP22255, aka pink lightning bugleweed, has burgundy, green and white foliage with pink flowers that work for a more natural look, Cady said. At 6 inches tall, it is tough and tolerates drought once established. The taller flowers are temporary, and once they are gone, what's left is a hardy plant of shorter stature.

Winner of the most recommended plant

Every grower mentioned *Leptinella squalida* 'Platt's Black' (Platt's Black brass buttons), which checks off a lot of boxes.

It's evergreen and it will take both sun and part-shade. Foucault describes it as tidy for modern landscapes. It's vigorous, but not invasive, according to Cady. And, in the right spot, it is absolutely gorgeous, McCoy said. With soft, ferny growth, it hugs the

ground and features small, yellow flowers.

As an experiment, Dinsdale planted a whole 350-foot-long driveway with it in a checkerboard of pavers and grass. She said it filled in all the gaps and seemed to be impervious to traffic. It prefers a little shade, though, and doesn't like to be completely dried out.

Leptinella is great for weaving with other ground covers, Whitworth said, and she prefers *Leptinella potentillina* (verdigris brass buttons), which she said is fluffier and greener, not as dirt colored as Platt's Black, and works well in moist environments with *Mazus reptans* (cupflower).

Less commonly used

Little Prince of Oregon Nursery, which specializes in ground covers, has a

whole brand category called "Foot Traffic Perennials." Designed for that purpose alone, it has more than 50 varieties, the majority of which are shipped to retailers for the homeowner market.

According to Seely, Little Prince has eight to 10 varieties of *Thymus serpyllum* available at any given time, as well as all of the durable top sellers — Scotch and Irish mosses and blue star creeper.

But for something different, Seely recommended *Azorella trifurcata* 'Nana', aka cushion bolax. It's a very dense grower with dark green, finely cut and stiff evergreen leaves and small yellow flowers. "It's not

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New Zealand moss (*Scieranthus uniflorus*, top) and miniature mat daisy (*Bellium minutum*, bottom) are both good for use in fairy gardens, lending a touch of delicate magic. PHOTO OF NEW ZEALAND MOSS COURTESY OF SKAGIT GARDENS. PHOTO OF MINIATURE MAT DAISY COURTESY OF T&L NURSERY.

expansive areas where there might be turf replacement. In Dinsdale's experience, it's drought-tolerant and evergreen. It forms a tight, ferny mat with blooms spring to summer that can be mowed at the end of the blooming season to tidy the 2-inch stems. Little Prince sends a lot of *Erodium reichardii* (alpine geranium) to California because it takes the heat and part-shade well and has a mass of petite flowers from about late spring through summer, depending on the variety.

Erodium × *variable* 'Bishops Form' (bishops form cranesbill) has pink flowers, and according to McCoy, seems to bloom forever, even without regular water. It has no disease or insect problems. It is best used in pathways for its low-growing 2–3 inch by 6–12 inch reach and its ability to take light foot traffic.

Euonymus fortunei 'Kewensis' (wintercreeper euonymus) is tough and really dense. "It takes a little to get going, but then spreads, and is really good in the weed suppressing department," Whitworth said.

For its dainty nature, Whitworth uses *Bellium minutum* (miniature mat daisy), with its tiny daisies that bloom all summer long, and spreading evergreen habit. Foucault noted that it's not used as commonly, but it should be for its green color in winter and flowers that attract bees in summer. "It's a little bit delicate," she said, "but it just has a magical kind of look, and sometimes that's what you want in a look, in a path, a little fairy path." ➤➤

super soft and fluffy," Seely said, "but it's durable and performs well." *Lotus corniculatus* 'Pleniflorus', aka bird's foot trefoil, is versatile nationwide and hardy to Zone 3. Deer-resistant, it has yellowy-orange beak-shaped flowers from late spring into early summer and very tight, low-to-the-ground, medium-green foliage, according to Seely. *Cymbalaria aequitriloba*, aka Kenilworth ivy, flowers purple all summer long, is drought-tolerant and does well in shade. Foucault believes it works for the woodland look.

Scieranthus uniflorus, aka New Zealand moss, is a low-grower that reaches only 3 1/2 inches in size, resembling a thick carpet. "Customers order six flats at a time, for low fairy gardens," Cady said.

Potentilla neumanniana 'Nana', aka alpine cinquefoil, is used by landscapers in dry central Oregon, and can be used in wetter areas too. Long-lasting yellow flowers, almost like buttercup, bloom on a low-growing mat that is hardy to -40 F and deer-resistant. "Pollinators love it," Cady said.

McCoy describes *Herniaria glabra*, aka smooth rupturewort, as looking like a microscopic jade plant. It stays green, and there's no flower or fall color, but it is durable and drought tolerant, although less so than sedum and thymes. *Achillea* 'Brass Buttons', at 3 inches tall by 12 inches wide, is good for



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Mazus reptans offers a flat stature that is ideal for use along pathways.

PHOTO COURTESY OF T&L NURSERY.

Foucault recommends *Acorus gramineus* 'Pusillus Minimus Aureas' (sweet flag) to customers looking for a different color for its bright chartreuse foliage. Suitable for lower spots in the yard, it also loves wet, shady areas.

Mixing it up

Whitworth is a proponent of mixing different types of plants. She tries plants with hardscaping and ground covers, versus an all-plant pathway, for better maintenance, lower cost and a consistently good look.

"Blending is good," she said.

Foucault said mixing colors like yellow and green for variation — or evergreen and semi-evergreen — is a way to get the best of both worlds when using two plants with different characteristics.

Whitworth mixes *Leptinella* with 'County Park' star creeper and *Mazus rep-*

tans for its flat stature and evergreen habit.

She also has more recently begun to use the Alpine rockcress (*Arabis ferdinandi-coburgii* 'Old Gold') mixed with *Mazus reptans* for its nice dense mat.

Whitworth believes it's better than many thymes at crowding out weeds. Some of the growth reverts from its variegated gold color to green, but she said she likes that because the green is the vigorous part. Plus, it is glossy, showing off pretty white flowers in spring.

In the future

Customers are asking for natives for pathway and foot-traffic plants. According to McCoy, sometimes people select plants that can thrive in poor soils with little natural summer water, and place them in



a landscape where water and fertilizer are plentiful. Suddenly the plant becomes overgrown and uncontrollable.

"You will get a giant mess almost overnight," McCoy said.

The work is to find in trials how to take a native that's made for neglect and put it in more pampered settings and make it work.

In the meantime, plants that are already sold as ground covers will continue to be explored for their possible use in pathways and walkways — and even driveways. ☺

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