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Article Published September 1, 2016

No Need to Tiptoe Through These Flowering Perennials

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My grandmother was a great kitchen gardener who knew how to make a five year-old girl behave in between the rows of cabbages, carrots, and tomatoes.

“Tiptoes!” she said. “Or we might step on the good garden fairies.”

It took me a long time to get over the fear of harming garden fairies. While I still don’t walk on plants with tall or delicate stalks, I now count some low-growing perennial plants among the walkables. Moss, for instance, is tougher than it looks, as are ground-hugging sedum and pachysandra. I have found low-growing thyme and “pinks” resilient. Sweet woodruff looks none the worse for my visits. Low-growing varieties of bellflower, chamomile, and yarrow are not only walkable but mowable as well.

Walkable groundcovers are important because they can replace low-traffic lawn areas.

Researchers at the New England Wildflower Society (NEWFS) in Framingham, Massachusetts create groundcover experiments with native plants. At a recent talk for the local Wild Ones chapter at Connecticut College, NEWFS propagator and stock bed grower Dan Jaffe suggested two varieties of native plants tough enough to replace lawn: Woodland strawberry for shade and meadow strawberry for sun.

“Most people don’t realize that native strawberries are quite walkable,” says Jaffe. “I wouldn’t play Frisbee with the dog on strawberries, but you can certainly walk to the mailbox and back.

“These strawberries form very dense cover, and they need very little care. You can even run a mower or weed whacker over them once a year to neaten them and keep the tree seedlings down,” says Jaffe.

Both of these plants produce edible berries. For those who like to grow their own, wild strawberries are easy from seed. If you like to use nursery plants, Garden in the Woods, Framingham, Massachusetts, and Nasami Farm, Whately, Massachusetts, sell the plants. So do some local independent garden centers. Call around.

Some other walk-tolerant natives include Meehan’s mint, seersucker sedge, and silver sedge. Several walkable groundcovers are grass-like, such as fine-leaved Pennsylvania and Appalachian sedges.

When I use the Internet to research longer lists of “walkable” plants, the online groundcover nurseries are happy to offer suggestions. They also provide ways to find their plants within your zip code region. To create your plant lists and participating retailers, visit www.treadwellplants.com, www.jeeperscreepersusa.com, and www.stepables.com.

Here are a few pointers for creating a dense, weed-smothering bed of groundcovers:

First, start with a bed that is clear of all other vegetation—grass, weeds, and other flowers. It can take two to five passes with various weed removal techniques to achieve a clean slate.

Second, place plants close together. If the reference books or websites say to plant 12 inches apart, try six inches. Denser planting means more plants and more cost initially, but it covers ground faster and leaves less

opening for unwanted plants.

Third, keep in mind that trees and shrubs are the natural vegetation in southern New England. To keep the groundcover bed healthy, you'll need to remove tree seedlings a few times each year.

Finally, new groundcovers need adequate water until established—no matter how drought-tolerant they will eventually become.

If you're ready to create a new look around the low-traffic areas of your yard or community, why not park the lawn mower and consider these walkable groundcovers? According to my grandmother, the garden fairies will appreciate the peace and quiet.

Kathy Connolly is a landscape designer and garden writer from Old Saybrook. Reach her through www.SpeakingofLandscapes.com.