

Walkable Groundcovers

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I'm always looking for interesting groundcovers, with say, a maximum height of six inches or so. Ideally, this groundcover would cover the larger open areas in the landscape. This is commonly referred to as the lawn area. It must tolerate moderate foot-traffic and not need mowing more than a few times a year and be able to tough-out dry and cold periods without losing its attractiveness. Lately, many neighborhood grass lawns ('Floritam' St. Augustinegrass) are sickly and thinning due to large patch disease, take-all root rot, insects, drought and neglect. 'Floritam' has been the "workhorse" groundcover since it was released in 1973 by both the University of Florida and Texas A&M (get it, 'Floritam'?). But the stuff is not barefoot friendly. It is comparable to walking on Brillo pads! Plus there must be some alternatives which don't require as much water. Yes, usually the problem is the PEOPLE who overwater, but St. Augustinegrass (St. Aug.) is known to require more water than other turf grasses (<http://turfpath.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/BMPmanual.pdf> page 13). There is no arguing the need to conserve water. And, for me, less maintenance (time) is of keen interest. Therefore, the quest!

I see two main camps in this lawn groundcover issue. Camp A is the vertical monospecies purists who want the outdoor carpet look. The Camp B folks just want it green, but tidy. The species mix is not critical; those in Camp C are the type who do not understand curbside appeal (a big deal in this buyers' market!) and pretty much ignore their yard (and armpits and may have goats on their rooftop as in the Hormel TV commercial

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeYIqD2YjIE> ; why did his name have to be

Doug?). Camp C is a special project group and will be excluded for now.



Centipedegrass growing at the Extension Service Office at 14700 Immokalee Rd.

The options for Camp A folks seem to be grasses only. Are they obsessive-compulsive? And it must be a monoculture of a given species. It appears lawn purity has its roots in Levittown, Long Island. Back in the mid-1940s, Abe Levitt initiated the first gated community and coined lawn maintenance axioms for his postwar, suburban development. "A fine carpet of green grass stamps the inhabitants as good neighbors, as desirable citizens." In fact if you didn't mow your lawn once a week, Levitt sent a mowing crew out and billed the homeowner. Eww, the social stigma is hatched!

Three grass species with lower water requirements than St. Augustinegrass (in home lawn situations) are centipedegrass, bermudagrass and bahiagrass. Centipedegrass grows like a

miniature St. Augustinegrass. It is a light green shade but very low maintenance. A new, darker green variety is 'Hammock' centipedegrass. There are some newer varieties of bermudagrass which could be maintained at two inches or less with a rotary mower, one is 'Celebration' bermudagrass. However, these grasses don't tolerate shade very well, so if you need a sod under the ole oak tree they won't work. Although centipedegrass is the best choice of the three above. I'm skipping zoysiagrass as I'd classify it as high maintenance.

Certain varieties of St. Augustinegrass are slower growing than 'Floritam' and will tolerate shade better, such as 'Seville' and 'Delmar'. But, some in the landscape maintenance industry claim these varieties don't seem to live more than 2 or 3 years. Not all agree on this, however.

All of these monocots have unique pest or cultural issues which should be studied before planting. More information is available at:

http://hort.ufl.edu/yourfloridalawn/turfgrass_selection.shtml



Left: Be sure to use the rhizomal type peanut for a groundcover. Right: Muehlenbeckia axillaris 'Nana'. Photo, American Farms web site.

Back to Camp B. The choice is limited, unfortunately, to plants which are available commercially, and that is rhizomal peanut *Arachis glabrata* 'Ecoturf' or 'Needle Point'. This groundcover will take a few years to fill in. The flavor of the flower reminds one of peanut butter! Imagine that! According to Craig Hutchinson, President of Landscape Florida, you may need to look out for rabbits wanting to nibble the peanut flower and plants as well. The other type of peanut plant you will find on the market is stoloniferous, which may fill in faster (aggressive runners), but it requires more water and is prone to mites and winter-kill, see USDA fact sheet: <http://tinyurl.com/442tucs> .

A new introduction called wire vine (*Muehlenbeckia axillaris* 'Nana') is another fine textured plant which may work well as a lawn species. It may be too aggressive though! Stay tuned for more on this one.

Within Camp B is a subset group of individuals who just want their lawn area to be green and aren't worried about the uniform texture thing (Camp A individuals may call it a chopped spinach or patchwork quilt look). One way this typically may work: new plants which migrate into my (for example) thinning St. Aug. yard are evaluated to see how compatible they may be as a ground cover. However, I can't seem to find too many people who like this approach. Number one is my wife. And why do I keep finding marketing cards from landscape

companies stuck in my door proclaiming they can help me solve my yard “problems”? Am I stuck in a world of vertical monocot obsessive compulsives?

So, some examples of typical lawn settlers (encroachers?) are Mexican “clover”, which is also known as large-flower pusley (*Richardia grandiflora*) and threeflower beggarweed (*Desmodium triflorum*). During times of drought or irrigation failure, I have seen St. Augustinegrass lawns go brown and the *Richardia* was in full bloom and not stressed. The *Desmodium* is also drought tolerant and makes a neat, fine textured groundcover. I cannot for the life of me understand why my father is determined to kill this legume species in his dwindling Bahiagrass lawn. Even the Camp A people might envy a solid stand of this very fine textured gem. Why look a gift horse in the mouth?



Left: Mexican clover, which is also known as large-flower pusley (Richardia grandiflora) attracts bees and butterflies. Right: Threeflower beggarweed (Desmodium triflorum) is a fine textured mat-forming legume.

Another broadleaf plant, green shrimp plant (*Blechum pyramidatum*), is invading yards in my neighborhood. It is a coarse plant if left alone, but finer textured when mowed. I rather like it, but I seem to be in the minority. It was set back by cold temperatures these last 2 winters (2009-10 and 2010-11), but it rebounds faithfully by mid-May. There are some plants I won't accept. One is the yellow flowering sheep sorrel (*Oxalis spp.*) which has those little okra shaped seed pods which explode, throwing seeds all over the landscape beds. For more plant ideas, go to: [http://miami-](http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/Pubs_LnG2.shtml#ground)

[dade.ifas.ufl.edu/Pubs_LnG2.shtml#ground](http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/Pubs_LnG2.shtml#ground) and see ground cover articles by Dr. John McLaughlin. This last web site is a treasure chest of horticulture info.



This lawn is mostly green shrimp plant (Blechum pyramidatum), the host for the malachite butterfly.

Worried about being ostracized or fined by the HOA landscape monitors if you experiment? Not to worry! Senate Bill 2080, which passed in early 2010 states that a deed restriction or covenant may not prohibit any property owner from implementing Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ on his or her land and states a local government ordinance may not prohibit any property owner from implementing Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ on his or her land. It also states local governments must use the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ standards and guidelines when developing landscape irrigation and Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ ordinances. To see the bill, click here: <http://www.flsenate.gov/data/session/2009/Senate/bills/billtext/pdf/s2080er.pdf> . Of course if one is doing a major overhaul, you are better off getting your community architectural review board approval of what you have in mind. You need to use the right plant for the right place and sometimes St. Augustinegrass is not the right plant if it requires extra fertilizer, pesticides and water to survive. Broaden your perspective and remember there is green sustainability (water conservation) and less maintenance (you can read more or go to the beach!) if you can accept multiple species in your lawn. Consider that selecting drought tolerant groundcovers, that is, lawn diversity, will lead to sustainability!

If you have some other walkable groundcover ideas (no synthetic turf or gravel please) or feedback please email me.

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