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On the cover: If you've been dreaming of stepping out the backdoor and into a gorgeous, sparkling pool like this one, it's time to plan. Turn to page 28 for expert advice on dipping your toes in the water and getting started. Photo courtesy of Veneman Collections.

Toss the Turf

Creeping perennials are low-maintenance substitutes for lawns

by Don Eberly

A welcoming, lush and green lawn is something to be proud of, but the challenges of maintaining it can be tough. Where traditional plants and turf fail in the landscape, using creeping perennials is an alternative that is both ornamental and functional. “Almost every homeowner has an area in the landscape where grass just won’t grow,” says Frances Hopkins, founder and CEO of Under A Foot Plant Company. “Creeping perennials provide the solution for these problem areas.”



Photos courtesy of STEPABLES

Creeping perennials should not be likened to common groundcovers, though it is easy to confuse the two. “The difference is definitive,” Hopkins says. “Groundcovers grow much larger at 12 to 24 inches and do not make for a pleasant walking surface. Creepers will grow only about 2 to 4 inches, creating a pleasant, low visual plane typically associated with a lawn, plus they are sturdy enough to handle foot traffic.” Stepables, Hopkins’ line of more than 140 creeping perennial varieties, provide solutions for troublesome landscapes.

“Creeping perennials have thousands of tiny, compact root nodes that firmly grasp the soil,” Hopkins says. “As often as you step on them with the soles of your feet, they will vigorously take root; the more they are walked on, the faster they will creep across the landscape space.”

Plant selection

First, it’s important to decide how much you’re going to use the planted area. “Foot traffic and function are among the most important considerations when selecting lawn replacement alternatives,” Hopkins says. This is why she has categorized

Stepables into three usage groups – for light, moderate and heavy foot traffic areas.

Light foot traffic means someone will be walking on the creeping perennials one to two times per week; moderate is one to two times per day, and heavy is three or more times per day. When choosing plants, the denser a plant, the more traffic it will take. Therefore, a list of specific areas including expected levels of walking and strolling is a good, initial means to a successful change from grass to this type of planting.

Curb appeal is another important consideration related to improving a home’s landscape and overall appearance. “Think about the elements of decor – brick, slate, concrete, paint color, and color schemes,” Hopkins says. “Make plant choices that work well with the surroundings.”

With these considerations in mind, the next step is choosing the right plants for the area’s environmental conditions. Hopkins says the No. 1 thing to look for is sun to shade ratio and where the light hits. If the plot of land in question is in sun, consider if it is always full sun or if the exposure is less, such as four hours in the morning or afternoon, or just two hours right at noon. Be certain to read the plant labels for sun and shade specifications when shopping at your local garden center.

Next, homeowners are able to find out their soil quality by taking a sample to a local garden center for analysis. Based on the results, garden center employees can help choose a soil amendment, which ideally should be something with excellent drainage. Correct drainage is described as allowing an appropriate amount of water absorption by the plant’s roots, while also permitting excess water to be drained away from the plant. Of course, determine whether the area has regular water access.



The turf transition

Making the transition from a conventional grass lawn to one with creeping perennials takes planning. Be sure you choose

the proper plant for the area and function, and one that has plenty of availability from the local garden center.

Next, determine the density of the plants. Spacing them 12 inches apart, for example will require fewer plants, but they will take a year or more to fill in and need a bit of maintenance. Spacing plants just 2 inches apart will require more plants, costing more. Deciding how dense to plant creeping perennials depends on how much money is in the budget and if instant gratification is a priority. Hopkins developed an online plant calendar at www.stepables.com that estimates plants' growth rates, appropriate spacing, and the area in square feet to be planted.

The next step is removing the sod, and tilling and amending the soil with high-drainage components. A well-prepared bed is necessary to develop a dense, healthy planting. Once the bed is ready, consider placing a slow-release fertilizer at root level. "Do not place fertilizer directly on the plant because this will burn the foliage," Hopkins says. Homeowners also can use a liquid feed fertilizer once plants are in place. To avoid hand weeding, homeowners may opt to apply a groundcloth or preemergent herbicide, though creeping perennials naturally inhibit weeds.

For best results, plant creeping perennials even or just above the soil line, but never below. Planting below the soil line will cause water to collect and, ultimately, drown the plants.



Homeowners who wish to topdress plants with mulch, compost or topsoil should first plant varieties just above the soil line, Hopkins says.

The final step is just that – gently step on each plant to set it in place and get it started growing. "Believe it or not, gently stepping on each new plant actually attaches the roots to the soil line. In about three days, little roots will emerge from the nodes," Hopkins says.

As with traditional lawns, the more thought, planning, effort and care that homeowners put into installing a bed of creeping perennials, the more it will pay off in the end with the long-term benefit of a beautiful, functional landscape with far less maintenance and more time to simply enjoy it.

Laura Drotleff and Sally Credille contributed to this article.

Editorial Resources begin on page 42.

Choose Your Creeping Perennial

| Light Foot Traffic | Moderate Foot Traffic | Heavy Foot Traffic |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Dianthus 'Tiny Rubies' | Lysimachia nummularia 'Aurea' Golden Creeping Jenny | Isotoma fluviatilis 'Blue Star Creeper' |
| Veronica pectinata 'Blue' | Ajuga Hybrid 'Chocolate Chip' Dwarf Bungleweed | Thymus serpyllum 'Elfin' Miniature Thyme |
| Erysimum kotschyanum 'Orange Flame' | Trifolium repens 'Atropurpureum' Bronze Dutch Clover | Herniaria glabra 'Green Carpet' |
| Mentha requienii 'Corsican Mint' | Veronica repens 'Sunshine' Golden Creeping Speedwell | Sagina subulata 'Irish Moss' |
| Mazus reptans 'Purple' | Sedum spurium 'John Creech' | Sagina subulata 'Aurea' Scotch Moss |

FRONT STEPS

P. 15 Hamilton County Department of Community Development, 138 E. Court St., Cincinnati, OH 45202, (513) 946-8234, www.hamiltoncountyohio.gov. **The Money Pit**, (888) 666-3974, www.moneypit.com. **National Arbor Day Foundation**, 100 Arbor Ave. Nebraska City, NE 68410, (888) 448-7337, www.arborday.org. **RepairClinic.com Inc.**, 48600 Michigan Ave., Canton, MI 48188-2240, (800) 269-2609, www.repairclinic.com.



Silver Spring, MD 20910, (301) 589-1776, www.nfrc.org. **Simonton Windows**, P.O. Box 1646, Parkersburg, WV 26102-1646, (800) 746-6686, www.simonton.com. **Simpson Door Company**, 400 Simpson Ave., McCleary, WA 98557, (800) 952-4057, www.simpsondoor.com. **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency**, Ariel Rios Building, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20460, (202) 272-0167, www.epa.gov.

MAKE A SPLASH!

P. 28-31 Anthony & Sylvan Pools, (877) 729-7946, www.anthonysylvan.com. **The Association of Pool & Spa Professionals**, 2111 Eisenhower Ave., Alexandria, VA 22314, (703) 838-0083, www.theapsp.org. **Eastgate Pools**, 685 Old Highway 74, Cincinnati, OH 45244, (513) 528-4141, www.eastgatepools.com. **Jacuzzi**, (800) 288-4002, www.jacuzzi.com. **Sun Spot Pools**, 349 Elliott Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio 45215, (513) 821-8422, www.sunspotpoolandpatio.com. **Superior Pools**, 7198 Cincinnati-Dayton Road, West Chester, OH 45069, (513) 777-0747, www.superiorpools.us. **Veneman Collections Inc.**, 6392 Industry Way, Westminster, CA 92683, (877) 654-7001, www.venemanfurniture.com.



ASK THE EXPERTS

P. 17 Ray St. Clair Roofing Inc., 3810 Port Union Road, Fairfield, OH 45014, (513) 874-1234, www.raystclairroofing.com.

DESIGN YOUR DREAM ROOM

P. 18-22 American Society of Interior Designers, 608 Massachusetts Ave., NE, Washington, DC 20002-6006, (202) 546-3480, www.asid.org. **Hoffman & Albers Interiors**, 9405 Kenwood Road, Cincinnati, OH 45242, (513) 793-9100, www.hoffmanandalbersinteriors.com. **The Linen Lady**, (770) 365-9995, thelinenlady@bellsouth.net, www.thelinenlady.biz. **Reflections of Style Interiors**, Cincinnati, (513) 752-7456, reflectionsofstyle@fuse.net. **Sealy**, 1 Office Parkway at Sealy Drive, Trinity, NC 27370, (800) 697-3259, www.sealy.com. **Select Comfort**, 6105 Trenton Lane North, Minneapolis, MN 55442, (888) 411-2188, www.selectcomfort.com. **Serta**, 2549 W. Golf Road, No. 309, Hoffman Estates, IL 60194, (888) 557-3782, www.serta.com. **Simmons Beautyrest**, www.simmons.com. **Tempur-Pedic**, 1713 Jaggie Fox Way, Lexington, KY 40511, (800) 510-8323, www.tempurpedic.com. **Tyson Designs**, Cincinnati, (513) 600-7162, www.gltysondesigns.com.



DOWN TO EARTH- TOSS THE TURF

P. 34-35 STEPABLES, Under A Foot Plant Company, 4742 Liberty Road S, No. 326, Salem, OR 97302-5000, (503) 581-8915, www.stepables.com.

CLUTTER CONTROL: A NEW WORK PLACE

P. 37 Ohio Chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers, www.napo-ohio.net. **Organized by L**, Ohio, (614) 499-2443 elimes@columbus.rr.com.



OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITIES

P. 23-27 AE Door Sales/Service/Commercial, 1260 West Sharon Road, Cincinnati, OH 45240, (800) 845-0493, (513) 742-1984; 8430 U.S. 42, Florence, Kentucky 41042, (859) 283-1984. **Energy Star**, US EPA Climate Protection Partnerships Division, Energy Star Programs Hotline & Distribution (MS-6202J), 1200 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Washington, DC 20460 (888) 782-7937, www.energystar.gov. **Kessler Construction Services LLC**, 3926 Colerain Ave.,

Cincinnati, OH 45223-2519, (513) 574-8812, www.kessler-construction.com. **National Association of the Remodeling Industry**, 780 Lee St, Suite 200, Des Plaines, IL 60016, (800) 611-6274, www.nari.org. **National Fenestration Rating Council**, 8484 Georgia Ave., Suite 320



Do you have ideas and information you'd like to share with Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Home Improvement? Please e-mail Editorial Director India Powell at ipowell@homeimprovementmag.com.

For more information, resources and interactive forums, visit our website, www.cincihomeimprovement.com.