

Add groundcover to stone paths



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Ask a Master Gardener

Question: We are putting a stepping stone walkway in the front yard, and we would like to use something other than grass to fill in between the stones. Can you suggest other plants that will work well as a ground cover?

Answer: Stepping stone walkways are a nice design element, creating an inviting welcome for visitors to enter and explore the garden. They are often used in free flowing cottage style gardens, as well as in very contemporary gardens. Adding groundcovers to stone paths provides a touch of softness to what would otherwise be hard raised edges and an easy place for weeds to take hold. For the many different garden styles and growing conditions, there is a groundcover that will work; you should be able to find just the right plant for your stepping stone walkway.

When selecting a plant for a stone path there are several

criteria to look for – low growing habit so as to not obstruct the path, resilience enough to tolerate foot traffic and easily bounce back, the ability to spread quickly to fill the gaps, low maintenance and the ability to grow in the light and soil conditions of your site. Below are suggested groundcovers for both sun and partial-sun/shady locations, along with their special characteristics.

SUNNY LOCATIONS:

Creeping Thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) grows to about 4 inches, produces small purple flowers, emits a nice scent when stepped on, tolerates difficult soil conditions (sandy to clay), is drought tolerant. A popular variety is Elfin thyme, which grows to only 2 inches and fits well in small spaces.

Green Carpet (*Herniaria glabra*) is very low growing at 1 to 3 inches, forms a mass of tiny green leaves that turn bronzy red in winter, is drought tolerant and handles foot traffic. It can also be grown in shade.

Stonecrop (*Sedum*), had many low growing varieties at 1 to 4 inches; thrives in poor soils and in hot, dry areas; spreads easily and tolerates moderate foot traffic, although some are more delicate. A couple favorite varieties are Gold-moss and Dragons Blood.



PIXABAY PHOTO

Thyme is a great alternative to grass for filling the spaces between pavers on a stone pathway in a garden

PARTIAL-SUN TO SHADY LOCATIONS:

Blue Star Creeper (*Isotoma fluviatilis*) is very low growing and flat to 2 inches, produces tiny blue flowers in spring to summer, looks delicate, but is tough and tolerates foot traffic.

Dwarf Mondo Grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nana') grows to 2 to 4 inches, is green in color (unlike the taller Black Mondo Grass), can tolerate foot traffic and is drought tolerant.

Irish Moss (*Sagina subulata*) is not actually moss, but a creeping perennial. It forms a

lush, green, velvet-like carpet and grows to about 4 inches, tolerates light foot traffic. It is also known as Scotch Moss (*S. subulata* 'Aurea'), which is chartreuse in color.

Jewel Mint of Corsica (*Mentha requienii*) grows about ½ inch high, forms a creeping mat with tiny leaves that resembles moss, releases minty scent when stepped on and produces tiny purple flowers in summer.

When planting between stepping stones, the soil condition is important. Often stones or pavers are laid on compacted soil and a layer of

sand, not ideal conditions for groundcovers. To plant, you may need to dig out some of the current soil and replace with loose, nutrient rich soil between the stones, about 6 inches deep for the roots to grow and at least 2 inches wide between the stones. Often groundcovers are sold in flats, an economical option; you can cut the plants into 2 to 3 inch wide sections which are then planted 6 to 9 inches apart, depending on spreading habits. Make sure to cover bare sections with more soil or compost. Next you want to irrigate the plants, keeping them moist until they are established. For long term care, consider installing drip irrigation between the stones, pop-up micro sprayers or adjust other sprinklers in the garden to ensure the groundcover is watered.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-236-3052, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.