

Unusual Groundcovers

Distribute 08-30-2018

Lawn grass is not the best choice for your landscape if you want to reduce water use, cope with shade, reduce maintenance requirements, address poor soils, and maximize wildlife habitat. Consider one of the unusual groundcover alternatives instead of grass.

Last year I wrote about horseherb (straggler daisy) and its value as a wildlife plant and as a groundcover. The low growing weed shows up in lawn areas that do not do a good job of supporting grass. In many neighborhoods in San Antonio it fills the gap in settings where the soil is thin and has become overly shaded as the oaks and other trees prospered more than the lawn grass. Designating horseherb as a replacement for grass started out as a joke because, as a seeding perennial, the plant is almost impossible to control. It grows where lawn grass is not very successful and mows well, so the best compromise was to let the horseherb stay. In addition, horseherb is a favorite nectar source for the black swallowtails that decorate our landscapes year around, and it is a favorite browse choice of deer that are in many of our neighborhoods. It turns out that horseherb has long been used as a groundcover in other habitats, so it was easy for area nurseries to supply transplants.

Recognizing the value of this yellow-flowered, native plant as a butterfly nectar source, it was used as a groundcover in a popular certified butterfly garden. Now, however it is nowhere to be seen because the other native low-growing groundcover that was selected for the butterfly garden has completely covered the groundcover area. The “other” native groundcover that is dominating the garden is frog-fruit (*Phyla nodiflora*). Like horseherb butterflies use the flowers for nectar. The butterflies, common streaky skippers and others are smaller than the black swallowtails that use horseherb, but it is also used by buckeye and white peacock butterflies as a food source for their caterpillars.

As a groundcover the white-flowered frog-fruit grows to about 6 inches tall and makes an attractive but not overwhelming planting. Deer may browse the plant but not heavily. I have it growing in a sloped area near the street and in an open area that was a remnant compost pile. Both areas are well-drained, and neither is irrigated. Unlike the horseherb which temporarily disappears during droughty periods, the frog fruit has been blooming attractively all summer. Transplants are available at some area nurseries or frog-fruit, can be transplanted from existing plantings by moving a piece of stem and root.

One of the best groundcovers for San Antonio landscapes is dwarf Mexican ruellia, also called dwarf Mexican petunia. It grows to about one foot tall with slender pointed leaves and violet, pink or white blooms. It will grow in sun or partial shade and is not a favorite deer food. In most neighborhoods the deer will eat dwarf Mexican petunia during a drought, but not normally. The plant is aggressive enough to fill in the space when planted every 18 inches but will not take over the neighborhood. Don’t mistake the dwarf version for full-size Mexican petunia because it will take over the neighborhood!

Most winters dwarf Mexican ruellia is evergreen but during a winter with temperatures less than 20 degrees it may freeze back but will re-grow from the roots.

In my experience, the easiest way to establish a groundcover is to spray the designated area with a glyphosate product (Round-up) to kill the current grass or weeds. When the spayed area turns color

from green to brown you can mow it and then plant the new groundcover transplants right into the killed sod. The glyphosate killed plants serve as a mulch for the new planting of dwarf Mexican ruellia, frog- weed or whatever you are planting. If you are a SAWS customer and you replace lawn with groundcovers like dwarf ruellia, you are eligible for a rebate if you meet the requirements outlined on their website for the newest water saver coupon.

Gardeners that want to learn about growing a winter vegetable garden can join me for a free program today at 9:30am at 6802 Dorothy Louise Dr near the Medical Center. Everyone who attends will receive a free broccoli plant to start their winter garden. Exit Loop 410 at Babcock west and turn left on Dorothy Louise Dr across from the running track.