

Groundcovers
by Sandy Agnew,
EcoMedic Ecosystem Restoration Services

The high environmental cost of the traditional grass lawn has been widely discussed for many years – heavy water use, heavy chemical use to fertilize the grass and control weeds, and heavy use of fossil fuel to carry on the endless cycle... fertilize, water, mow... fertilize, water, mow... fertilize, water, mow. Not to mention the sterile green desert which attracts little wildlife, except the now infamous Canada goose. No wonder many people want to substitute alternatives to grass on their properties.

The great temptation is to substitute the toughest, thickest, fastest growing groundcover available. Unfortunately these non-native groundcovers don't stop growing when they get to the edge of the space you wanted to cover with it. They carry on spreading and are soon dominating the landscape over large areas, often whole woodlots. Once established, they are very hard to eradicate.

Two such bad actors are periwinkle and goutweed. They will spread into natural forest areas and soon displace the native plants so that you are left with a virtual monoculture, the opposite of biodiversity, which is the cornerstone of a healthy environment.

There are no native groundcovers that are as aggressive as the two aliens named above. So it takes a little more patience to establish native groundcovers such as bearberry, pussytoes, wild strawberry and wild ginger. Native vines such as Virginia creeper, virgin's bower and wild grape will also form an effective groundcover and will spread to cover up bare rocks and other hard to plant areas. These native plants are much friendlier to each other and will form a patchwork which is much more attractive to look at and more wildlife friendly.