

Go ahead – step on them!

Some plants are better than others in their ability to handle a little foot traffic. These are the perfect choices to plant in between flagstones in a path or a patio or that spot in your garden that becomes an occasional shortcut.

While there are very few plants that want to be walked on repeatedly, here are some that won't complain about a few footsteps.

For Shade

Although most forms of bugleweed can stand up to foot traffic, **Chocolate Chip Ajuga** is better behaved and cuter than its parent. It barely grows 3 inches tall but spreads 12 to 18 inches wide in just about any location – it even grows well in dry shade. An ambitious groundcover, it still needs plenty of room. Spikes of purplish blue flowers bloom above the dark, chocolate-colored foliage in spring and then sporadically throughout the summer. Another plus: deer don't find it appetizing.

Chinese astilbes are bastions in the shade garden, but the variety **pumila** (*Astilbe chinensis* var. *pumila*) is the one to choose for the possibility of footsteps. It only grows 6 inches tall and moves in slowly spreading clumps of fern-like foliage. Tiny lilac pink flowers, densely packed onto sturdy upright stems rise above the graceful, red-green foliage in early to mid summer. I love it because it tolerates drought better in my garden than any other astilbes.

Baltic ivy (*Hedera helix* 'Thorndale') vigorously spreads by 12 to 24-inch creeping stems that set roots from anywhere along the stem. It emerges kelly green but quickly turns dark green. It forms an evergreen mat just 6 to 8 inches tall that can stand up to a lot of abuse. Baltic ivy grows well in sun or shade and is adaptable to most soils.

Rounded, golden leaves are the appeal of **Golden Creeping Jenny** (*Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea'). It's a small, but rambunctious groundcover that can be used to replace grass in a shady area. It grows quickly as stems snake out from the plant and covers as much space as is available.

Irish and Scotch moss (*Sagina subulata*) spread rapidly to form a low, soft carpet. Both sport tiny, star-shaped, white flowers in spring; and both dislike drought and soggy soils, preferring evenly moist but well-drained soils. Scotch moss has yellow leaves and grows best in clay soils – we have plenty of those; Irish moss is bright green and is more tolerant of a variety of soils.

Another option is **periwinkle**, also called creeping myrtle (*Vinca minor* 'Dart's Blue'). It spreads rapidly to form a low, evergreen groundcover. Cute bluish flowers bloom heavily in spring and sporadically throughout the summer. It grows best in moist, well-drained soils but can handle drought once established.

For Sun



If you have a sunny area with dry, poor soil, choose **Snow in Summer** (*Cerastium tomentosum*). Fast spreading, low clumps of silvery gray foliage are studded with tiny white flowers in late spring to early summer. It is almost indestructible – deer don't even like it! Prune Snow in Summer back after it is done flowering to keep it tidy.

Creeping Phlox is a rapidly spreading perennial with soft, needle-like foliage that barely reaches 6 inches tall and stays lush all season long. Dense clusters of small flowers illuminate the spring landscape. Choose creeping phlox to plant around a path through a sunny rock garden – it looks spectacular growing over rocks. **Blue Emerald** has delicate lavender blue flowers; bright reddish pink flowers cover **Scarlet Flame**; and **White Delight** has, you guessed it, white flowers.

Some of the smaller, ground-hugging **Sedums** can handle being walked on occasionally. **Island of Sakhalin** forms 4 to 5 inch sprawling mounds of silvery blue foliage that becomes tinged with red when fall's cooler temperatures arrive. It sports rosy pink flowers in late summer. **John Creech** is another fine choice. It grows just 2 inches tall but spreads almost a foot. It boasts rose-colored flowers in summer over dense, semi-evergreen, bright green foliage. They both tolerate drought and are deer resistant.

Thymes are the most widely used plants to use between flagstones in a path or patio because they give so much and ask so little. Their only requirements are lots of sunshine and well-drained soil. **Doretta Klaber** has tiny, hairy, green leaves that form a ground-hugging mat just 1 to 2 inches tall and tufts of lavender flowers. **Doone Valley** forms a mat 3 to 4 inches tall and 18 inches wide. Soft pink flowers bloom over foliage that is green most the summer and fall, but is variegated in spring. What I love most about Doone Valley is its incredible lemony scent. Tiny reddish-pink flowers bloom atop the low, mat-forming, light green leaves of **Red Creeping** thyme. **White Creeping** thyme is similar to its cousin except it blooms in white. The creeping thymes spread faster than other varieties.

Gray Creeping Germander (*Teucrium aroanium*) forms a low mound of small, silvery green, evergreen leaves that are the perfect foil for its lavender-pink flowers. It grows best in full sun to part shade in well-drained soil and won't mind a bit if you step in to get a whiff of its honey-scented flowers.



Heavenly Blue Speedwell (*Veronica* 'Heavenly Blue') is easy to grow. Just give it full sun and well-drained soil and it will reward you with small spikes of bright blue flowers in late spring to early summer over a carpet of green foliage.

If you have an area where people don't fear to tread, don't fight it. Just choose an appropriate plant and go with the (traffic) flow.

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