MOWING TO RENOVATE GROUNDCOVERS

Donald R. Hodel, Landscape & Nursery Advisor, University of California Cooperative Extension, 2615 S. Grand Ave., Suite 400, Los Angeles, CA 90007

Dennis R. Pittenger, Extension Environmental Horticulturist, University of California Cooperative Extension, Riverside, CA 92521

Groundcovers are widely used in the landscape as transition plantings, borders, and slope covers. In California, they have special merit since their irrigation and maintenance requirements are often less demanding than those of turfgrasses. However, once established, many species of groundcovers either lose vigor and thin out, or grow vigorously and develop an irregular, overgrown appearance with a thick and uneven thatch of stemmy growth. In both cases their appearance is unsightly and the groundcovers can collect trash, pose a fire hazard, harbor rodents, and interfere with irrigation. Regular pruning or renovation of groundcovers is sometimes recommended to keep plantings vigorous, neat, healthy, and attractive and reduce thatch. Unfortunately, there are no research-based guidelines for mechanical management of groundcovers that specify proper timing and height of mowing, or expected recovery rates for individual species. In our study, eight species of groundcovers commonly used in California were subjected to renovation by mowing for a two-year period: red apple, prostrate coyote bush, pink iceplant, trailing lantana, prostrate myoporum, trailing African daisy, dwarf rosemary, and garden verbena. Plant response was evaluated monthly for height, density, thatch, overall appearance. Six species responded favorably to a four-inch mowing; thatch and height were significantly reduced for up to several months with only a brief loss of aesthetic quality. Prostrate coyote bush, trailing lantana, prostrate myoporum, and garden verbena responded well to March mowings while pink iceplant and trailing African daisy responded well to June mowings. In the two species that did not respond favorably to mowing, red apple and dwarf rosemary, mowing significantly reduced thatch and height but their aesthetic quality and density were unacceptable for several months. These findings provide landscape managers, architects and designers with the specific information needed to conduct effective, minimal input maintenance programs where a low-growing, non-turf plant material is desired.