



## More Native Hawaiian Plants as Ground Covers

by Gregory A. Koob

### 'Ūlei

#### *Osteomeles anthyllidifolia*

**Growth type:** Sprawling shrub.

**Height:** 2 to 4 feet.

**Spread:** 4 to 6 feet.

**Flowers:** Showy, white, wild-rose-like flowers in clumps.

**Foliage:** Shiny to dull green, compound leaves with small leaflets.

**Light:** Part shade to full sun.

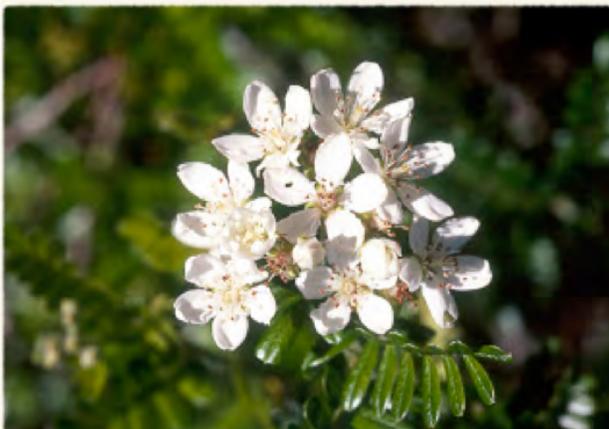
**Moisture:** Allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of salt, wind, heat and drought.

**Planting distance:** 1 to 3 feet.

**Trimming requirements:** Trim to encourage branching when young and to keep confined when older.

**Notes:** There are upright-growing forms of this species. Use the low-growing types for ground covers. The showy flowers are followed by cranberry-sized, white fruit that is sometimes rather sweet-tasting and sometimes insipid tasting.



*'Ūlei flowers are followed by ornamental, fleshy, white fruit. This plant stays green and attractive even in droughts.*

### Nehe

#### *Melanthera tenuifolia*

**Growth type:** Spreading herb.

**Height:** 1 to 3 feet.

**Spread:** 2 to 5 feet.

**Flowers:** Small, yellow, daisy-like flowers.

**Foliage:** Very fine, fernlike leaves.

**Light:** Full sun to part shade.

**Moisture:** Moderate.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of moderate drought.

**Planting distance:** 1 to 3 feet.

**Trimming requirements:** Trim to keep confined to the planting area and to encourage branching.

**Notes:** This is a federally listed endangered species and should only be purchased (or sold) with an endangered species label from the Department of Land and Natural Resources.



*This type of nehe is an endangered species but it makes a very fine ground cover. It also works well in hanging baskets. The yellow, daisylike flowers contrast very nicely with the finely divided, fernlike leaves.*

## **‘Ōhelo kai**

### ***Lycium sandwicense***

**Growth type:** Spreading shrub.

**Height:** 1 to 3 feet.

**Spread:** 2 to 5 feet.

**Flowers:** Small, white, star-shaped flowers followed by red fruit.

**Foliage:** Olive-green, small leaves.

**Light:** Full sun.

**Moisture:** Allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of wind, salt, drought and heat.

**Planting distance:** 12 to 24 inches.

**Trimming requirements:** Trim to encourage branching.

**Notes:** Some small branches lose their leaves and act as thorns (though they are really short, sharp, branches). This makes ohelo kai a good barrier plant. Regular trimming is needed to encourage many side branches, otherwise the plants tend to be sparse and sprawling.



*‘Ōhelo kai gets its name from the red berries that follow the white flowers on this sprawling beach shrub. With regular pruning, the ohelo kai makes a very good ground cover for dry areas and beach plantings.*

## **Pili grass**

### ***Heteropogon contortus***

**Growth type:** Upright, clumping grass.

**Height:** 2 to 4 feet.

**Spread:** 1 to 2 feet.

**Flowers:** Insignificant flowers followed by distinctive, twisting seed heads.

**Foliage:** Light green grassy leaves growing upright from a central base.

**Light:** Full sun to part shade.

**Moisture:** Moderate.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of wind, salt, heat and drought.

**Planting distance:** 1 to 2 feet.

**Trimming requirements:** None. Plantings can be rejuvenated by yearly or bi-yearly trimming to 6 inches tall.

**Notes:** Pili grass was used as a thatching material for traditional Hawaiian houses. It makes a good, tall ground cover and should be used in place of fountain grass (an illegal plant in Hawaii).



*When planted close together, pili grass makes a good, tall ground cover. It also works well as a specimen plant wherever fountain grass would be used.*

## Mau'u 'aki'aki

### *Fimbristylis cymosa*

**Growth type:** Clumping herb (sedge).

**Height:** 4 to 8 inches.

**Spread:** 4 to 8 inches.

**Flowers:** Insignificant flowers in tan clumps on long spikes held above the foliage.

**Foliage:** Thin, stiff, upright or smoothly arching leaves arising from a central stem.

**Light:** Partial shade to full sun.

**Moisture:** Allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of salt, wind, heat and drought.

**Planting distance:** 4 to 6 inches.

**Trimming requirements:** None.

**Notes:** Plants grown in full sun will be shorter than those grown in partial shade. The flower spikes can be removed to make this plant look more like mondo grass or be left on as an added feature.



*Mau'u 'aki'aki looks like a stiff mondo grass but is really a sedge (mondo grass is a lily relative). Use this small, clumping sedge any place you would use mondo grass. It performs better than mondo grass in hot, sunny, dry areas and in seaside gardens.*

## 'Ena'ena

### *Pseudognaphalium sandwicense*

**Growth type:** Creeping herb.

**Height:** 4 to 6 inches (with taller flower spikes).

**Spread:** 6 to 12 inches.

**Flowers:** Yellow flowers on spikes 6 to 10 inches tall.

**Foliage:** Very fuzzy and light green to bright white.

**Light:** Full sun to partial shade.

**Moisture:** Allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of salt, wind, heat and moderate drought.

**Planting distance:** 4 to 8 inches.

**Trimming requirements:** Trim off flower spikes to prolong season.

**Notes:** Plants grown in full sun have a brighter white fuzz on them. These plants should be grown as annuals, replaced as they die. To prolong the usefulness of these plants, remove the flower spike. The seeds are on little parachutes and will blow around in the wind, making it only somewhat likely that seedlings will come up where last year's plants were.



*The short-lived 'ena'ena is a fun plant to use as a ground cover. The bright white, fuzzy leaves are reminiscent of lamb's ears and feel good to the touch. Keep the flowers trimmed off to extend the growing season.*

## Nehe

### *Melanthera micrantha*

**Growth type:** Sprawling herb.

**Height:** 1 to 1.5 feet.

**Spread:** 3 to 6 feet.

**Flowers:** Insignificant yellow flowers barely visible among the leaves.

**Foliage:** Finely divided leaves that have a fern-like appearance. Not as finely divided as *M. tenuifolia*.

**Light:** Full sun to partial shade.

**Moisture:** Keep moist.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of mild drought once established.

**Planting distance:** 1.5 to 3 feet.

**Trimming requirements:** Keep growing points trimmed to encourage side shoots. This can be an aggressive grower and should be trimmed to keep it confined to a planting area.

**Notes:** This is an endangered species. This nehe also works well in hanging baskets, if the soil is kept moist.



*Another nehe with finely divided leaves, Melanthera micrantha is also an endangered species. This nehe doesn't have the attractive yellow flowers of M. tenuifolia, but it works just as well as a ground cover.*

## Pōhuehue

### *Ipomoea pes-caprae*

**Growth type:** Sprawling vine.

**Height:** 8 to 12 inches.

**Spread:** 7 to 15 feet.

**Flowers:** Very showy, purple to white morning-glory flowers that last only one day.

**Foliage:** Rounded, two-lobed light to dark green leaves.

**Light:** Full sun.

**Moisture:** Allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of salt, wind, heat and drought.

**Planting distance:** 2 to 4 feet.

**Trimming requirements:** Trim to keep confined to its growing area.

**Notes:** This can be an aggressive plant when it is actively growing. It grows fastest and best in the summer. This is an ideal plant for beach plantings and does a good job at stabilizing beaches. Long stems can be pruned or easily wound back toward the main growing area.



*One of Hawaii's better-known native plants, pōhuehue makes a good ground cover in drier areas of the state. The flowers are an added bonus.*

## 'Aki'aki

### *Sporobolus virginicus*

**Growth type:** Creeping grass.

**Height:** 8 to 16 inches.

**Spread:** 2 to 4 feet.

**Flowers:** Insignificant on stiff spikes.

**Foliage:** Thin, light-green leaves on skinny stems.

**Light:** Full sun to part shade.

**Moisture:** Keep moist or allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of salt, wind, heat, drought and standing water.

**Planting distance:** 4 to 6 inches for quick coverage, 8 to 12 inches for thinner coverage.

**Trimming requirements:** None needed.

**Notes:** This grass does not take mowing well but can be trimmed occasionally by a string trimmer. It works well in areas that are hard to access or don't need a "finished" look, such as the "rough" of golf courses. It is very versatile in its growth requirements and can spread by runners that root and send out new stems.



## 'Akoko

### *Euphorbia degeneri*

**Growth type:** Prostrate shrub.

**Height:** 4 to 8 inches.

**Spread:** 8 to 16 inches.

**Flowers:** Insignificant.

**Foliage:** Coin-shaped and sized round leaves, light green to tinged red in color.

**Light:** Full sun to part shade.

**Moisture:** Allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of salt, wind, heat and drought.

**Planting distance:** 10 to 16 inches.

**Trimming requirements:** None.

**Notes:** Leaves turn red when the plant is overly stressed.



*'Akoko is happiest in beach plantings but will grow quite well away from salt spray. Well-drained soil that is allowed to dry between waterings will assure its health.*

*The ability of 'aki'aki to grow under most environmental conditions makes it an ideal ground cover for hard-to-maintain areas of a yard or garden.*

## Palapalai

### *Microlepia strigosa*

**Growth type:** Spreading fern.

**Height:** 2 to 5 feet.

**Spread:** 3 to 5 feet.

**Flowers:** None.

**Foliage:** Triangle-shaped, soft fronds, light to dark green.

**Light:** Full shade to full sun.

**Moisture:** Keep moist.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of shade and occasional drought.

**Planting distance:** 1 to 2 feet.

**Trimming requirements:** None needed. May have to occasionally remove dead fronds.

**Notes:** The fronds are used to make lei. Plants in full sun need higher amounts of water than those in shade. Those in shade can tolerate drying out slightly between waterings. Lei makers have their favorite sources for fronds. Not all palapalai are created equal when it comes to making lei.



*Palapalai is a nice native fern to use in the garden. The rhizomes crawl along the soil, sending up new fronds every couple of inches. Fronds can be harvested for making lei without being missed in an established planting.*

## Pala'ā

### *Sphenomeris chinensis*

**Growth type:** Spreading fern.

**Height:** 1 to 1.5 feet.

**Spread:** 1 to 2 feet.

**Flowers:** None.

**Foliage:** Lacy, light green fronds with dark stems. The fronds sometimes blacken if damaged or stressed.

**Light:** Full shade to full sun. Prefers partial sun.

**Moisture:** Allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of occasional drought.

**Planting distance:** 8 to 12 inches.

**Trimming requirements:** Remove old fronds as they blacken.

**Notes:** The fronds are used for making lei. This fern does very well on slopes with partial shade or full sun and will start spreading by spores once it is established in an area. A dye was made from this fern to color kapa.



*Pala'ā is one of the better choices for ground covers on steep slopes. Once established it will start spreading by spores as well as by rhizomes, helping to control erosion. Remove old fronds to keep your planting nice and green.*

## **Rock's Tetramolopium**

### ***Tetramolopium rockii***

**Growth type:** Slightly spreading herb.

**Height:** 6 to 8 inches.

**Spread:** 6 to 12 inches.

**Flowers:** Small daisy- or aster-like white flowers.

**Foliage:** Slightly sticky and fuzzy, light green, spoon-shaped leaves.

**Light:** Part shade to full sun (prefers full sun).

**Moisture:** Allow to dry between waterings.

**Tolerances:** Tolerant of salt, wind, heat and drought.

**Planting distance:** 4 to 8 inches.

**Trimming requirements:** None.

**Notes:** This is a fairly short-lived perennial and should be rejuvenated with new plants every year or two. This is an endangered species. Seeds are on little parachutes.



*Rock's tetramolopium has small, white, asterlike flowers held above its light green, fuzzy leaves. This endangered species works very well in hot, dry, sunny areas.*