



Photo by Deb Lebow Aal

## September 2022 Newsletter

*Edited by Colleen Lyon*

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# Fire Resistant Landscaping and Native Plants

by Deb Lebow Aal

This is a topic every Colorado homeowner should pay attention to. As you all know, our fire season in the West is getting longer and hotter. And, while it's of much greater concern if you live close to the rural/forest intersection, it is now relevant even for urban and suburban dwellers. Aerial photos of neighborhoods after devastating fires show that a home's landscaping can be a critical factor that determines whether a house is spared or burns to the ground. We at WOFR are not experts on this, but here are some general guidelines:

- **Clearing your land entirely is not a good idea** (other than in Zone 0, see below). Bare earth allows hot air to travel fast, capturing embers, with nothing to slow it down. There are many examples where people felt that clearing their land would protect their homes only to find that it exacerbates the problem.
- **“Native species are generally the best plant materials for landscaping in defensible space.”** (CSU Extension – [Fire Resistant Landscaping](#)). Research in California on native species vs exotic species found a distinct advantage to native plants for fire mitigation. There are however, a number of exceptions, such as conifers.
- **Conifers in general, especially juniper, are highly flammable** . While all vegetation is ultimately flammable, Juniper trees are much more prone and some towns are considering banning Junipers around homes. Conifers are more flammable due to their high oil and pitch content. That's too bad as they are important to wildlife, but there are more fire-adapted alternatives such as Ponderosa Pine with its thick bark, and non-conifers such as Gambel oak, and Serviceberry.

In truth, where and how you plant is most critical. The bottom line is to select plants based on zones, working from your home (buildings, structures, decks, etc.) out to 100 feet or your property line, whichever is closer.

- **Zone 0 (0-5 ft from house)**: Create a 3-5 foot, preferably 5 foot, buffer between your house and the surrounding landscape. This area should contain nothing flammable. Keep gutters clean, clear debris, and have nothing stored under the eaves — particularly, no wood piles! No wood mulch or wood fencing adjacent to structures. There are lots of fire-safe choices: a cement apron, a flagstone walkway, pea gravel, or any kind of rock gravel.
- **Zone 1 (within 5-30 ft of house)** : Plant low succulents and native plants that retain moisture. Avoid high resin content and sap plants. Avoid planting in large masses. Rather, plant in small, irregular clusters or islands with gravel and boulders in between. Irrigate regularly, yes, it's unfortunate, but a bone-dry landscape, which some of us have attempted, is not going to help in a fire situation. No wood piles or wooden fences — metal and stucco are preferable. Use gravel, decomposed granite, or stone for pathways. These will slow a fire's progression.
- **Zone 2 (everything further than 30 ft from structures)** : Keep hedges 30 feet from structure. Tree canopies should be a minimum of 6-12 feet apart. Keep up on maintenance, meaning clear weeds and brush, and prune dead branches. Limb the trees up to 100' from houses. Don't clear vegetation — thin it and manage it. Run lots of paths and make some rock seating areas. Landscaping this way can be really pretty and can create fire breaks.

Houses burn from an accumulation of embers. So, get rid of areas where embers can accumulate and ignite. This would include wood decks, wood piles, even wooden or wicker furniture.

Beyond that, plant diversely with plants that won't all burn in the same pattern at once and the best design is planting in islands, surrounded by gravel, rock, and boulders, or non-flammable paths. The best model I've seen of this is Kelly Grummons' space in Arvada.



And why are native plants more fire-adapted than exotics? Well, it's mostly about the moisture content of plants. Native plants maintain a much higher "live fuel moisture content" (yeah, that's a scientific term) than traditional plants. Lower growing natives exhibit even better fire behavior. And, because the roots of native plants typically go so deep, they have a higher likelihood of growing back after a fire.

So, hydration takes precedence over plant lists. I am not going to give an exhaustive list of natives that do best in fire. For that, there is the internet (e.g., [FireWise Plant Material](#) and USDA's [Fire Effects Information System](#)), but a few notes:

- **Mulch.** Wood mulch obviously is flammable, but if it is kept hydrated and not too deep (under 3"), it can be a good mulch in a fire-resistant landscape. Overhead irrigation is preferred to drip as it gets all of the mulch wet. Much better of course is gravel mulch. Native plants tend to like being planted in chip gravel anyway. You'll have to rake or blow leaves and debris out in Fall, but other than that, it's pretty low maintenance and doesn't need to be replenished as often as wood mulch.
- **Shrubs.** We love shrubs – native shrubs are important for the ecosystem (Richard Phillips wrote about native shrubs in our July newsletter). The primary concern for shrubs in a fire-resistant landscape is that they are "ladder fuel." In other words, they guide the fire up. So, don't plant shrubs near windows, vents or tree crowns; keep the grass low around shrubs; and prune dead branches and sometimes, lower branches. Some good fire-adapted native shrubs are Wood's rose and Western Snowberry.
- **Oaks.** We talk about oak trees having a very high ecosystem value. They support a myriad of caterpillar and moth species. Oaks are also good fire-resistant trees. There is no such thing as a tree that doesn't burn, ultimately, but deciduous trees like oaks and aspens, apples and plums, can be resistant. In the right place, they can protect a house. Oak leaf litter is also good to keep under an oak tree. It will keep the tree much healthier and therefore able to resist fire. Just keep it lightly irrigated.

And one more note (this is from my permaculture class): If you're actually building a new house from scratch, or have the luxury of siting a house on a large property, fire almost always moves uphill. So, position a house down below, preferably near a pond. If only....

Again, we are not fire experts. Consult the experts when re-doing a landscape to be fire resistant. Hopefully some of these tips can get you started on making your landscape more resilient and protecting your home in the horrific event of a fire nearby.

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## Artificial Turf - Again

by Deb Lebow Aal

In response to last month's article, on why artificial turf, aka plastic lawn, is not a good alternative, a reader sent a [handout](#) from Colorado Springs Utilities that details a few more reasons it is no good. Of particular interest is the link in that handout to [health reasons](#) not to install. So, again, we reiterate, if your neighbor is making noise about putting in artificial turf gently let them know of these reasons NOT to install it. The ecosystem will thank you.



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## Volunteer Spotlight

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### Vicki Saragoussi Phillips



I would be surprised if you don't already recognize Vicki Saragoussi Phillips! Vicki co-hosts our virtual Zoom programs with her husband Rick, ensuring attendees may enjoy the content whenever and from wherever they desire. Vicki is also our Registrar, setting up and managing our programs online with the information people need to have smooth and engaging experiences. We couldn't offer so many programs without Vicki!

Vicki spent over 10 years at Denver Botanic Gardens leading children's educational programs. While teaching children about Colorado's native ecosystems, Vicki immediately saw the benefits of incorporating native plants into her home landscape. For example, Vicki uses natives, such as Cleome, Coneflower, and Sunflowers, as companion plantings with her vegetables to invite and increase pollinator activity.

"Wild and playful!" is how Vicki describes her gardening style, which just makes you want to check out what she's created. When asked to describe her favorite native plant, Vicki came back with three. First, Autumn sage (*Salvia greggii*), a Texas native that thrives in our ecoregion. The upright stature of Autumn sage complements grasses beautifully, and its dark red trumpet blooms draw hummingbirds into Vicki's patio garden. Vicki also loves the "bizarre and unusual" Devil's claw (*Proboscidea louisianica*), which she proudly grew from seed last year. Devil's claw is so-named because its fleshy fruit pod splits into two "claws" as it dries - a real garden standout. About her third favorite, Vicki exclaims, "Jimsonweed (*Datura wrightii*) is dramatic and toxic!" This annual, which reseeds freely in Colorado, has evocative white

trumpet blooms with spiny tips.



*Datura wrightii*



*Proboscidea rightii*

We are lucky to have Vicki's high energy and sharp wit on the Wild Ones programming committee. Vicki enjoys volunteering because it helps her connect with other native plant enthusiasts so that she may "find more people to play with!"

Please [reach out](#) if you would like to join us as a volunteer in programming or any other area. We'd love to get to know you better.

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## Project Spotlight

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### Cherry Creek Renovation Tour Report



Looking back on midsummer, the weather gave us a welcome break for our tour on Sunday, July 24. At meeting time, the temperature was in the low 70's - a great respite from the previous week's highs in the upper 90's, especially since there wasn't a shade tree in sight!

We gathered - twelve Wild Ones and their friends - to hear the story of how Cherry Creek between Quebec and Iliff was transformed from a field of dead trees and waste dumps to a gently meandering stream channel with freshly planted meadows of native plants.



Our tour director, Jessica Anderson of Denver Parks and Recreation, assembled a group of two plant ecologists and a civil engineer from the design team to explain the whys and hows of what they had done. We saw more than a dozen species of blooming forbs and numerous native grasses starting to cover the bare ground. We also saw lots of weeds and learned how the City is actively controlling them now and plans to continue in the future.



We all left with an appreciation of the complexity of the project and were impressed by the City's commitment to using native plants.

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## Volunteer Request

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### Fall Seed Swap Planning Committee

Our fall Seed Swaps are just around the corner (see below). As soon as possible, Wild Ones Front Range Chapter needs a volunteer to help the planning committee. This person will work with key volunteers from partnering organizations to plan the event which typically is held in late October. No prior experience needed, but prior involvement in a seed swap would be helpful.

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## Upcoming Events

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***Important notice: we announce our events to members first, as our events are popular and sell out fast. So, if you are not a member, please consider becoming one!***

### Depot Prairie Park Tour

Wednesday, September 7, 2022  
6:00 pm

The City of Englewood is sponsoring a guided tour of one of WOFR's community demonstration gardens, Depot Prairie Park. Turf in this 1/3 acre park has been converted into pollinator habitat, including a seeded prairie meadow, Colorado native landscape, and a small crevice garden created by Kenton Seth and WOFR board member Danna Liebert. The tour will be led by Danna, and it is free but registration is required. [Register here](#) through the City of Englewood. [More info about the park here.](#)

## South Denver Yard Tours

Saturday, September 10, 2022  
9:00 - 11:15 am

\$10 for Members | \$25 for non-members

Join us as we tour two yards, one in South Denver, the other in Centennial. These yards, hosted by Jenifer Heath and Jonathan Sciarcon (thank you, hosts!) contain a huge variety of native plants. This tour is limited so please register soon. Please [register here](#).

## Annual Seed Swaps - Save the Dates!

### Denver

Saturday, October 15, 2022  
The Table Public House

### Colorado Springs

Saturday, October 22, 2022  
Garden of the Gods Visitor & Nature Center

### Fort Collins

Saturday, October 29, 2022  
Wolverine Farm Publick House  
10:00 am - 1:00 pm

*Add to your calendar - more info and invite coming soon!*

Become a local point person! We are looking for a local volunteer to be the Wild Ones' point person for the Colorado Springs and Ft. Collins' seed swaps. If you love this event, and live in either of these places, please consider being the point person for your area. We also need help setting up, during the event, and taking the event down. Watch for recruiting announcements.

Collect native seeds from your own yard! We can use all the seed you can collect. But, please follow these instructions:

- ONLY NATIVE SEEDS
- Seeds must be in containers or envelopes
- Mark the envelopes with: Latin name; common name; year collected; elevation; your first initial and last name.

We're also planning seed collection and seed cleaning events. If interested in participating, please contact Peggy Hanson at [pegshanson@gmail.com](mailto:pegshanson@gmail.com). These will be small, informal events, subject to the timing of nature's ripening.

## Native Plant Sales

Here are some other opportunities to buy native plants.

### City Park Farmers Market

Saturdays, 8:00 am - 1:00 pm

September 3 & 17  
October 1, 15 & 29



**High Plains Environmental Center:** Place your orders on-line. For more information, please see their [website](#).

And of course, when you shop at our local nurseries, **ask for Colorado native plants!!** The more we ask for them, the more they'll want to stock native plants.

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*We love to hear from you, and we are always looking for people to write articles for the newsletter. If you would like to comment on anything in this newsletter or write an article, please send your comments or ideas to [FrontRangeWildOnes@gmail.com](mailto:FrontRangeWildOnes@gmail.com).*

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Wild Ones Front Range Chapter | <https://frontrangewildones.org/>

