
WILD
ONES®
Front Range

Pulsatilla patens (Pasque Flower)
Photo by Peggy Hanson

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In this newsletter...

- ***Feature Articles**:* Mulch For Your Colorado Native Plant Garden; Native Plant Garden Prep - The Nitty Gritty on Lawn Removal
- ***Chapter Updates**:* Plant Swap Season!
- **Ask CSU Extension Anything** (About Native Plants): Expanded Shale - To add, or not to add?

- ***Help Our Chapter Thrive**:* Volunteer Opportunities; Wild Ones Membership
- ***Book Review:*** Prairie Up
- ***Upcoming Events**:* Garden Crawls; Potluck on the Prairie; Plant Labeling & Truck Loading for the Swaps!

Become a member today!

Mulch For Your Colorado Native Plant Garden

By Deb Lebow Aal

Okay, it's not the most exciting gardening article, but no doubt you have heard that mulch is important for a healthy garden. Is that true? And, mostly what we see on the Front Range is wood chip mulch. Is that the right mulch for your native plant garden?

Well, it depends. Yes, mulch is important to keep your soil healthy. And mulch can also be aesthetically pleasing, knitting your plants together. But the type of mulch you use is truly important. CSU Extension has a wonderful, comprehensive fact sheet on Mulches for Home Grounds that you should read before reading this. This article will not repeat what is in that fine fact sheet. Here, we will highlight four different types of mulch that seem to be best for native plant landscapes. Three are organic: green living mulch, leaves, and wood chip mulch. One is inorganic: gravel.

Living Mulch
In most places in Eastern Colorado, by far the best mulch you can have is green living mulch. That means no space between your plants, using the plants as your mulch. If you look at a healthy prairie ecosystem, that is what you'll see. Shoulder to shoulder, or petal to petal, plants. And, that could be how your mature native plant garden will look. If your garden is still sparse, native annual flowers are a good intermediate solution, but before you get to that stage, there are other options.

Living mulch

Leaf Mulch
Second to green mulch is leaf mulch. Nature's best, and for the most part, free! Nothing makes me sadder than to see leaves bagged up in plastic to be taken to the dump. Leaves provide habitat for many critters, particularly overwintering pollinators, and are the most sustainable additive you can give your plants and soil. As they break down, they add so much to the health of your yard. I have a leaf collection area in my

backyard, and use it year round. I do crush my leaves (with my hands — no fancy leaf crusher machine for me), as I find they don't blow away as easily, but, you do not have to do that. And, yes, pine needles are leaves, and contrary to popular belief, do not acidify your soil (yes — there's scientific evidence — if they do acidify, it's only slightly, and temporarily). They are a good mulch to use.

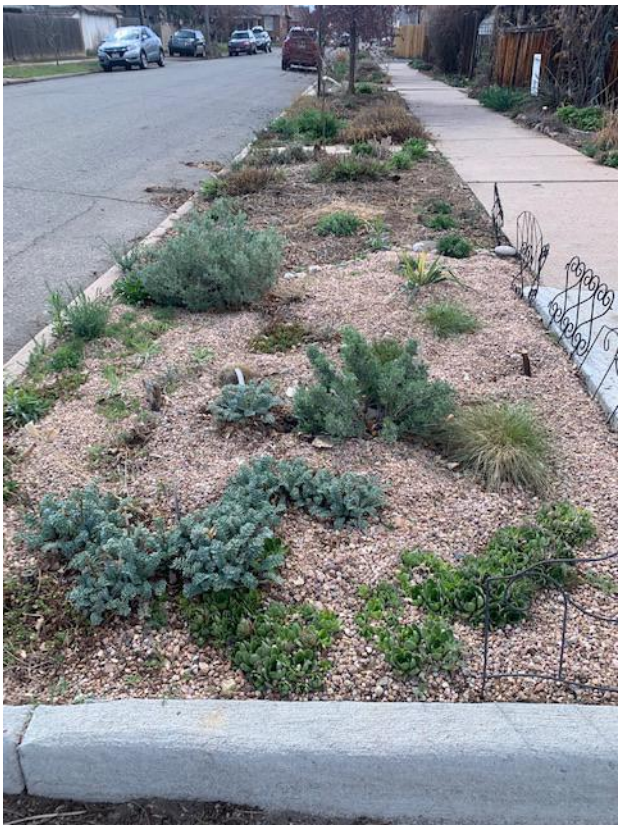
Wood Mulch

Then there's wood mulch. The downside to wood mulch is that it does get hot on the surface, and absorbs moisture. So, when either nature is watering, or you are watering, some of that water does not get to the plant roots. That's a bummer. The other disadvantage is that this is not a mulch that native prairie plants are used to, in the wild. There was not a lot of wood, or trees, in our short-grass prairie ecosystem. And the type of wood mulch you use is important. Any mulch that comes in a plastic bag is suspect. First, the plastic bag, enough said. But second, much of that mulch is dyed and treated so that it doesn't break down fast. That is not environmentally friendly.

You may have heard that wood mulch uses nitrogen as it breaks down that would otherwise be taken up by plants. Yes, it does take up nitrogen, but the amount taken up by the wood chips is restricted to the soil surface, not the rooting zone, so don't fret about this. Another thing to bear in mind — most native plants don't like the wood mulch close to their crowns, so you have to make sure it is a few inches away.

Despite all these downsides, there's nothing wrong with using wood mulch with your native plants. Wood chips are preferable to bark, and size is not insignificant — if you can, do not use the very large chips, but smaller chips (at least in places where it's not too windy), and you do have to replenish the mulch every few years.

And gorilla-hair mulch — the very fine-looking stringy stuff that landscapers seem to prefer. Landscapers prefer it, we think, because it's very easy to apply, and light to transport. It is terrible stuff — please don't use it. It does not allow water to easily get through, as it knits together, forming clumps, and therefore is not doing the plants or the soil any favors. A wood chip, not too large, is preferable.



Leaf/detritus mulch area next to a gravel mulch area

Gravel Mulch

And then there's gravel. Gravel is a fantastic mulch, but comes with some pretty hefty downsides. Gravel is a mined material, and mining has significant greenhouse gas and other environmental impacts, including significant impacts often to riparian areas. But, gravel keeps many native plants happy. It allows water to drain through much better than wood mulch, and promotes water infiltration better than wood or leaf mulch. Many of our Colorado native plants grow in the wild with a lot of rock in the soil, so it is a medium in which they have developed. There are exceptions, but for the most part, native plants do well in gravel. Aside from the significant mining and other environmental issues related to gravel, it is also hard to keep "clean," i.e., leaf and debris free. If you like the look of clean gravel (before your plants fill in) you'll have a bit of work to do. Particularly in shady areas, underneath trees, gravel is not a great idea. You'll be cleaning up a lot of debris.

Landscapers prefer gravel with sharp edges, as opposed to round edges (pea gravel), which can roll, and any stone you chose should be smaller than 1/2 inch in diameter, to get the benefits. A major advantage of gravel mulch is that you don't have to replenish often, if at all. And note, gravel mulch is not the same as gravel planting. That's a different topic we won't get into. If you really do want to use gravel, try looking for gravel that someone might be giving away. Reuse what is already out there.

Gravel mulch in early stage garden

Other Mulch Tips

I don't know if I have to say this, but I will — top dress with your mulch — do not dig it in. In fact, the less you disturb your soil, the better. The mulch (even the gravel!) will make its way down into the soil. And, if you want to discourage weeds and reseeding, a depth of 4 inches of mulch is preferred. If you want some reseeding, 2-3 inches is

preferable. If you don't want to lose your mulch, create a perimeter barrier — either solid edging material to keep the mulch in (and give you a cleaner look), or digging down a bit at the edges of your plot. And, no need for landscape fabric — ever! It does not work (except for maybe the first year), and in fact is truly bad for your soil and plants.

And, despite all that we said about mulch being good for your soil, leave some bare spots for our ground-nesting native bees. We have at least 946 (by some newer reports, over 1,000) different species of native bees in Colorado (honeybees NOT being one), and many of them require bare naked soil to survive. See CSU Extension fact sheet on Attracting Native Bees to Your Landscape.

Blog post link here!

Native Plant Garden Prep - The Nitty Gritty on Lawn Removal

By Karen Vanderwall

Many of you are looking at your tired thirsty lawns right now, thinking I should get rid of it! It's a daunting task, you are also probably thinking. Once you've worked through the challenging decision to replace some or all of your lawn to a native garden, the next challenge is how best to do it. Throughout the process remember you are transforming your low-diversity, resource-gobbling lawns to an ecologically thriving landscape!

Converting turf to garden bed, for the most part, comes down to four factors and the gardener has to make a decision on the approach they use based on a balance/combination of these:

1. ***Energy***: Work/labor involved and availability of both
2. ***Time***: How much time it takes to install the practice and how much time until native plants are in the ground
3. ***Size***: How big your garden will be, e.g. 10×10 ft or the whole yard (related to first factor)
4. ***Impact***: Effect on the environment (to what extent and for how long)

In terms of methods, the best approach correlates with the best match for the gardener and their personal situation. Having several options is probably helpful in getting you started. So more options, more native garden ecosystems!

Want to learn about five different approaches to turf conversion and which might be the best match for you?

Read the full article here!

Chapter Updates

Plant Swap Season

Yep! Spring is making itself seen and that means we are ramping up for PLANT SWAP SEASON! Hopefully you've seen the FaceBook posts. This year Wild Ones Front Range is partnering with many great organizations and all plant donations will be vetted to ensure health, non-noxious status and regional nativity. There is nothing like Plant Swap Energy (i.e. the peace, love, reciprocity, community, and climate resilience swirling amongst the plants and attendees alike).

The following plant swap events (kicking off on the first of June) are open to the PUBLIC — follow the links below and see our events section for dates and additional info:

- NOCO Plant Swap - Part of the Fort Collins Xeriscape Garden Party (this planning team has over 3,000 plants propagating in a greenhouse for the event!)
- Boulder County Plant Swap
- Denver Pollinator/Native Plant Swap and Giveaway (volunteer opportunities will go live May 21)

Pikes Peak regional coordinator, Sue Wright, is organizing a members-only swap:

- Pikes Peak Member-Only Plant Swap Social

While we hope you bring some native plants to share, it's not required (thanks to many amazing volunteers who are propagating native plants and helping to rescue unwanted native seedlings from gardens).

Pre-Plant Swap Volunteer Opportunities

Speaking of amazing volunteers, we are seeking the following:

- *Rescue Hosts* (host gardens that would let us pot up their unwanted native seedlings): If you or someone you know has a native plant that reproduced via self-seeding and want some help transplanting them, please contact Peggy at email below.

- *Diggers & Transplanters*: We can always use more help with our dig & donate (rescues) and transplanting of propagated material into pots for distributing at the Swaps. WOFR coordinates several "pop-up" events (typically short notice as mother nature is on her own schedule). Still, a few volunteers can get a lot of native plants ready for the swap in a short time at the last minute.

Interested in these volunteer opportunities or have other questions about donating plants? Reach out to Peggy Hanson, WOFR Swap Co-Chair, at pegshanson@gmail.com.

Photos by Peggy Hanson

Ask CSU Extension Anything (About Native Plants)

QUESTION: ***Some research shows that expanded shale is a very good additive for native plants. Do you recommend adding it when planting?***

Get the answer!

Answer developed by: John Murgel, Extension County Specialist, Horticulture and Natural Resources, Douglas County, Colorado State University Extension

Help Our Chapter Thrive

Volunteer With Us

Help us educate more people about creating and promoting native plant Coloradoscapes by sharing your time and talents with us. We're a volunteer-run chapter, so every member willing to help makes a meaningful impact. Plus, it's fun to work with and learn from other people who are passionate about our mission! Check out our Volunteer Opportunities page to see position descriptions for each.

Become a Member, if You're Not One Already!

We are a membership-based and member-led chapter. Please show your support for helping more Front Range residents convert their outdoor spaces into native plant Coloradoscapes by becoming a member today. Household memberships start at just $40, with Limited Income/Student memberships available for $25.

Join today!

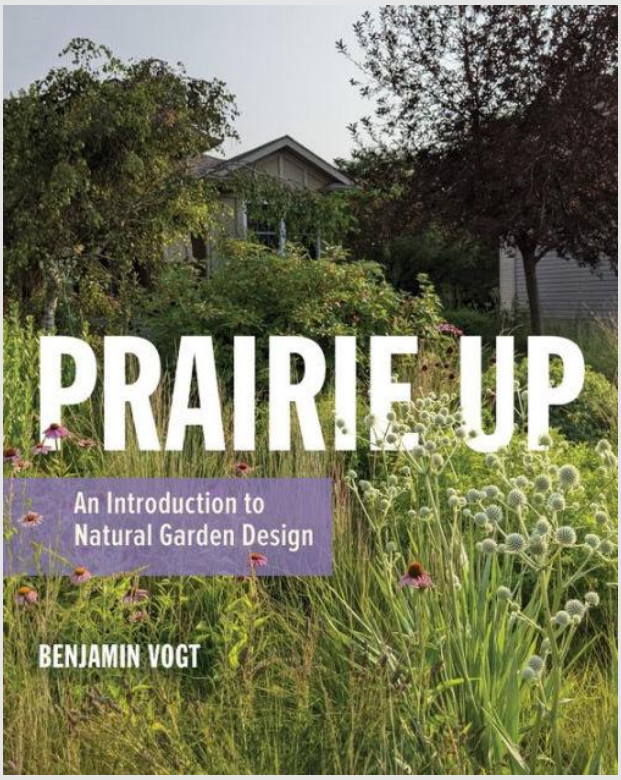
Additional benefits of becoming a Wild Ones Front Range member include:

- Discounts on and early notification of educational programs
- Invites to member-only local gatherings
- Access to our member-only Facebook group

Book Review

Prairie Up by Benjamin Vogt

Review by Richard Phillips



Benjamin Vogt is well known in the alternative gardening community. In his previous book, *A New Garden Ethic: Cultivating Defiant Compassion for an Uncertain Future*, he presented his gardening philosophy as being a protest to the mainstream world that is human-centric and looks for technological fixes for all environmental problems. He writes, "Your garden is a protest. It is a place of defiant compassion. It is a space to help sustain wildlife and ecosystem function while providing an aesthetic response that moves you. For you, beauty isn't just petal deep, but goes down into the soil, farther down into the aquifer and back up into the air. And for miles around on the backs and legs of insects. You don't have to see soil microbes in action, birds eating seeds, butterflies laying eggs, ants farming aphids. Just knowing it's possible in your garden thrills you. It's like faith, and it frees you to live life more authentically. Your garden is a protest for all the ways in which we deny our life by denying other lives. Plant some natives. Be defiantly compassionate."

This guy knows his prairie plants. He has given up the academic world to run a prairie garden design company called Monarch Gardens, located in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the heart of historic tallgrass prairie lands. Prairie is in his blood. He spent the first ten years of his life in western Oklahoma, where his grandparents homesteaded, then moved to central Minnesota and now lives in Nebraska.

His new book, Prairie Up, is a guide for those who want to convert a part of their own tiny homestead to a plant community closer to what it was before being converted to the modern idyll of an irrigated, manicured, green lawn with trees and shrubs from other parts of the country or the world.

I've read other primers on creating prairie lawns, but they have been focused on parts of the country foreign to us dry-landers. Vogt is describing what to do in a wetter

climate than Denver, but coming from Lincoln, he's getting closer to the historic short-grass prairie lands we live in than any other garden writer I have encountered.

Most of the plants Vogt uses in his gardens are familiar to gardeners along the Front Range. He is a believer in grouping plants that are compatible with each other, called plant communities. These groups can form a stable ecosystem, where plants balance each other instead of dominating, competing in a functional way. A community of plants working together to maintain a healthy ecosystem. This is an important and new way of thinking about garden design. Plant diversity also supports a diverse insect population.

In the chapter Planning, Installing, and Managing the Garden, Vogt gives a thorough description of how to convert a traditional lawn to a prairie garden. Several methods for killing the old lawn are covered. He explains how to make a scaled plan of the area and map out the new plant arrangement.

He is a proponent of laying out the garden in a matrix pattern. The matrix consists of pre-grown plants installed as plugs in a grid pattern on 12" centers. The spaces between the plugs are planted with seeds. The plugs can be either grasses (such as a bunchgrass variety) or perennial forbs, with the seeded area complementing the plugs (if the plugs are forbs, the seeds are grasses, or vice versa). Since forbs are the ornamental plants in the garden, he feels most people would opt to plant them as plugs so there is color in the first year of planting. Eventually the seeded areas will develop and fill the space between the plugs.

The chapter on Designing the Garden covers how to plan and install two types of gardens – one from seed and one from potted plants. For the seeded garden he covers how to determine the ounces of seed needed for each variety of plant, how to meet the seed's dormancy requirements so it can germinate, how to mix them and how to spread them. There are several example gardens presented to cover various conditions such as full sun or partial shade.

Overall, this book has all the information needed to plan and install your own prairie garden. I would recommend that you use the Toolkit on the Wild Ones Front Range Chapter website as a supplemental resource, especially for selecting regionally appropriate plants.

Upcoming Events

Check out our website's Events section for registration links and full event details!

Douglas/Elbert Counties Hidden Mesa Native Gardens Meet Up
Tuesday, May 14

WOFR May Board Meeting
Wednesday, May 15
Members only, Virtual

Northern Colorado Region
Potluck on the Prairie
Sunday, May 19
Members only

Southeast Denver Region Garden Crawl

Saturday, May 26
Members only

Plant Labeling + Truck Loading for NOCO Plant Swap
Friday, May 31

PLANT SWAPS!
Pikes Peak: Saturday, June 1
Northern Colorado: Saturday, June 1
Boulder: Sunday, June 2
Denver: Saturday, June 22

Tour Jack's Solar Garden
Friday, June 14

Get ready for WOFR Plant Swaps coming up in June! Photo from our 2023 NOCO Plant Swap.

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