



*Geum triflorum* (Prairie Smoke); photo by Terry Glase courtesy of Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

## May 2024

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Become a member today!

## High Altitude Gardening in Colorado

*By Karen Vanderwall and Deb Lebow Aal*

Many of you live, or garden, at high elevations, and we've heard that sometimes you feel neglected in that we don't address your specific issues at elevation. Well, here we will. If you live "high," and we will define that as above 7,500 feet, you have many unique challenges, including:

- Low temperatures are lower and can change very quickly
- Plant growth is slowed by cool mountain soil temperatures
- Plants growing at higher altitudes are exposed to higher UV levels, and can become sunburned during periods of intense sun (and, conversely, plants can get the sunlight they need for photosynthesis in shorter amounts of time)
- Higher elevations in general receive more precipitation. Cooler temperatures mean more morning dew, which plants appreciate
- Snow lasts longer, shortening the growing season, but adding moisture slowly, allowing the soil to gradually absorb water
- Lower air density translates into less oxygen and carbon dioxide for plants, slowing their growth



Terrace Garden - Wallflowers and Blue Mist Penstemons  
Photo by Irene Shonle

Knowing these challenges, here are some tips and tricks we've gleaned, mostly from talking to those of you with these challenging landscapes. And before reading this, there are two very good sources of information for you. First, the brochure: [Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Mountains 7,500' feet and above](#), and second, CSU Extension's fact sheet: [Colorado Mountain Gardening Basics](#). While not repeating what is in those excellent sources, here are our thoughts:

- **Patience!** Things grow slowly in the mountains. And, it's always best to start with smaller, younger plants, rather than installing larger, more mature plants — meaning, it may take a while to get the garden you've dreamed of.
- **Take cues from Mother Nature:** It's hard to imagine doing better than she did. So, take a hike and really key in on which plants grow together, and what looks

good together. And, perhaps realize that maybe you don't want to change what you have. If you are lucky enough to be in a relatively unspoiled environment, you may have a bigger burden than those of us gardening in areas where every inch has been developed. Maybe, leave well enough alone?

- **Use rocks, trees and evergreen foliage to define your space:** A backdrop border always enhances a garden. A natural one is ideal.



- **Ask not “Will it grow?” but “Should it grow?”** (Hence... native plants!): Don't try to force plants that cannot handle harsh conditions. You might like those flashy delphiniums, but do they really belong there? Plants native to your particular area will do best.
- **A concentrated growing season means overlapping perennial blooms that may not occur at lower elevations.** Again, check out your nearby natural areas to see what blooms when, and with what, and design with that in mind.
- **The lowest, coldest temperature is the defining factor of a plant's ability to succeed,** so pay attention to your [USDA Plant Hardiness Zone](#), as that's what's important. You can also check the National Wildlife Federation's [Native Plant Finder](#), put in your zip code, and find which native plants are best for hosting caterpillars and moths, an important piece of information if gardening for the ecosystem.
- **Microclimates are really important.** Find areas around your yard that are warmer or more protected, and plant your less hardy plants there. Near your house on the sunny side will have a slightly longer growing season. Areas near large rocks provide more heat and may extend the growing season or create pockets of moisture. In fact, install some large rocks for that purpose.
- **Pay attention to fire-wise landscaping,** as fire is a necessity and always a danger here in the Colorado mountains. The zone near your house should have fewer, or no, plants, with gravel or rock mulch. See [Fire Resistant Landscaping and Colorado Native Plants](#), a resource in the WOFR Toolkit.
- **As at lower altitudes, select a variety of plants that will bloom all season long, for your pollinators and birds.** Once again, I refer you to our brochure, Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens (for the mountains), for bloom times.
- **Containers with plants look so vibrant at high altitude.** The intense sunlight



makes the bloom colors more intense. Have a container or two around for color!

- **Voles, deer, moose, elk, rabbits, oh my!** We have to face the fact that we are living in their habitat, so fighting them is almost always a losing battle. Try not to grow plants they'll be attracted to (poppies!), or plant an outer perimeter of flowers they do like to try to keep the animals out there; we've even heard of rabbit feeding stations that work (e.g., placing alfalfa cubes and other things they like at the perimeter of your garden). The hills are alive — this seems to be the challenge all mountain gardeners face. There is no easy solution that seems to work all the time.

We each come at our garden differently, with our own version of an oasis. Whatever yours is, have fun with it. Nature can be a cruel teacher, especially at elevation, so approach gardening on high with patience, humor, and flexibility, and you'll be fine. Somehow, we have to laugh at, and maybe accept, what that vole just did to your new flower bed. That's nature at work!

*Blog post of this article here!*

## Engaging Kids With Nature

*By Vicki Saragoussi Phillips*

*This article was originally published in the Wild Ones National Journal (Fall 2022, Vol.35, No.3); all photos by the author, who is a member of our Front Range Chapter.*

“Wow, that bug has eight legs!”  
“Can I get closer?”  
“Mmm, it smells like chocolate!”  
“Oooh, it feels furry!”  
“Shhh, I can hear wind flying through the grass!”  
“Yum, tastes like salsa!”

– Reactions from a group of excited second graders during a field trip garden exploration.



*Gardens are magical places for children to make observations this summer.*

Many of us remember going outside after school and playing in our yards, on the street, in grassy fields or at the water's edge. The grittiest pile of dirt, muddy puddles or wispy collection of grasses and flora revealed endless opportunities for exploration, observation, imagination and discovery in our small, intimate worlds.

But today there are many distractions keeping children indoors, busy with flashy technology and in isolated, protective environments. What's missing are the many benefits and favorite childhood memories that grow from being in the outdoors!

## **Benefits to nature engagement**

By allowing children to connect with the natural environment, they benefit in so many ways. Exploring the outdoors increases their ability to concentrate and pay attention to detail, problem solve, discover and apply experiences in academic applications such as math, science, literature, history and the arts. The act of exploration improves their physical activity, social relations and self-discipline. Stress is reduced, happiness is heightened, and calmness and self-worth evolve.

Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in the Woods,” says, “The importance of exposure to nature is essential for healthy child development — physically, emotionally and mentally.”

## **Things to keep in mind when out there**

Focus on the local, familiar environment — what kids are most connected to — before tackling global environmental issues. For example, let them admire the beauty of pollinating buzzing bees before learning about their habitat loss and disease resulting from pesticide use. From there, they grow to appreciate the natural world and then begin to commit to citizen engagement.

Don't just babysit them, spend time exploring with them and ask lots of questions. Focus on “how does it look, smell, sound and feel?” rather than “what's that, what's its name?” Make connections with personal experiences and knowledge, then teach them more about the subject when they express interest.

Given the opportunity, children naturally interact with nature. They are innate scientists and they use their senses to experience the outdoors. They observe natural events that provide examples of how the natural world works. They problem solve by observing nature's solutions. Exploring with a hand lens or binoculars are great motivators and help the young observer get up close to their specimen.



Author and environmental educator, David Sobel says, “We need to offer the opportunity for children to connect with and fall in love with their immediate

environment before we ask them to be compelled to heal the environmental problems and push for policy change.”

*Want to learn some fun activities you can use to help children “fall in love” with nature?*

*Read the full article here in the National Wild Ones Journal (p. 13)*

## Chapter Updates

### **Plant Swap Season begins TODAY!**

#### **June 1**

- 10am-1pm – [Northern Colorado Native Plant Exchange](#)
- 9am-noon – [Pikes Peak Regional Native Plant Swap & Social](#) (Members Only)

#### **June 2**

- 1pm-4pm – [Boulder Regional Plant Swap](#)

#### **June 22**

- 10am-1pm – [Denver Pollinator/Native Plant Swap & Giveaway](#)

We have been in high gear preparing for these wildly popular events — up and down the Front Range, volunteers have been growing, digging/rescuing, and hardening off native plant seedlings to share far and wide. Thanks to the 35 volunteers and 5 site hosts who shared their time, energy, trucks and gardens at recent transplant and digs!

There will be **over 7,000 native plants** at three of our public swaps — more than 3,000 for Northern Colorado, 4,000 for Denver, and 400 for Boulder! And Pikes Peak region will have over 100 plants for their *member-only*, inaugural swap & social.



*WOFR Pikes Peak Regional Dig Volunteers*

Another thanks to the many generous folks who have donated supplies, contributing mightily to the success of the swap & giveaway events.

- We collected over 2,000 recycled 2.5” pots plus trays from regional gardeners and landscapers.
- American Clayworks and Supply donated five bales of the amazing LM-6 soil.



Such generosity allows us to do so much more for less.

### ***Want to Volunteer for the Denver Plant Swap?***

- Plant transplant, labeling and dig-to-donate events will be happening over the next couple of weeks — [sign up here](#) (scroll to the bottom for latest dates/times).

- Event volunteers still needed for transportation (large car or truck required) on 6/21, and the afternoon shift on 6/22 — [sign up here](#).



Member Denise Lee digs baby *Artemisia frigida*. Photos by Peggy Hanson.

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### ***Toolkit Spotlight***



### **Best Practices for Planting Native Plants**

It's that time of year! Did you just come home from your local plant sale or swap with a few (or a few flats of) new plants you now need to get in the ground? Here's a WOFR refresher on [Best Practices for Planting Native Plants](#).

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### ***Volunteer Spotlight***

#### **Colleen Lyon**

We are not sure we would be able to get our lively, informative, small but powerful, newsletter out every month if it wasn't for Colleen. She has helped streamline the process, and has an amazing eye for detail and editorial smartness. She has been our WOFR newsletter editor, diligently getting an edition out every month since March 2021 — just after she discovered Wild Ones for the first time through a WOFR-hosted talk by Jim Tolstrup on the [Historic Uses of Colorado Native Plants](#), which inspired her to complete the CSU Extension's Colorado Native Plant Master course. Making dye out of Rabbitbrush flowers is one of Colleen's autumn rituals.





When not doing a fantastic job editing our newsletter, Colleen primarily tends to her two-year-old son, Sorin (an adept bird watcher, seed planter/collector, and watering can operator); together, they tend to their dog, eleven chickens, compost pile, and various [sit spots](#) and growing spaces around their home in Fort Collins. Colleen enjoys experimenting in her permaculture inspired gardens, integrating native plants with fruits and vegetables (she's a fiend for *Asclepias tuberosa*, all berries, and heirloom pole beans). When not trying to squeeze in a mountain bike ride or swim during the growing season, she spends other bits of free time serving on the board of a local youth cycling organization, learning to lead school programs at the Gardens on Spring Creek, and as a long-time working member with Native Hill Farm.

Thanks, Colleen, for all you have done for Wild Ones Front Range chapter!

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## Help Our Chapter Thrive

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### **New Volunteer Opportunity — 23rd Street Garden (Denver)**

We are partnering with Denver Parks and Rec and need interested volunteers to help manage their 23rd Street Garden! This garden is directly in front of the Denver Parks and Recs greenhouse, and is a lovely mature garden full of native plants (although not all natives). WOFR hopes to use this garden as a setting for educational events. For now, the garden needs to be weeded, and at some point, planted with more natives. No need to be a native plant officianado – we will train you! Our first training session there will be Monday, June 17 (8:30 -10:30 am). Please [contact us](#) if interested in volunteering.

### **Submit Your Native Plant Questions!**

Help us grow our knowledge base! If you have a question about native plants, [ask us here](#) and we will get you an answer from experts at Colorado State





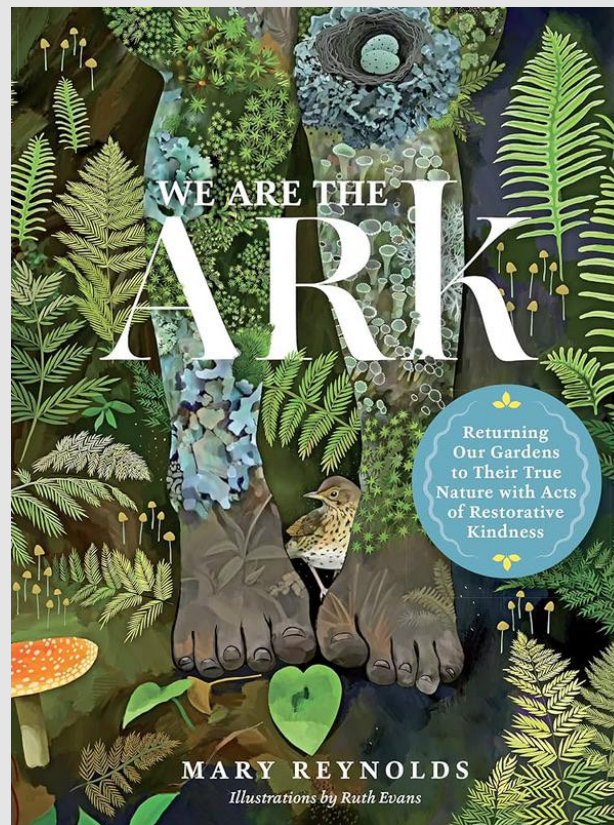
University (CSU) Extension, who generously bring their expertise to our “Ask CSU Anything (About Native Plants)” newsletter column. We love being curious and learning alongside you, so please send us some interesting questions to be featured in a future newsletter!



## **Book Review**

### **We Are The Ark by Mary Reynolds**

*Review by Pam Sherman*



Author Mary Reynolds seeks to get us off our butts with joy, giving *at least half of any land under our care* back to nature (be it a window box, a yard, a park or a ranch) to become “as useful a sanctuary as possible to the local flora and fauna.” In the other half, she asks us to grow our own food.

She asks us to let go of landscaping, which she sees as controlling the land, though we do have to remove non-natives, especially invasives. As a former landscape designer, she is well aware of urban dwellers’ cultural need to display a tidy yard.

To shift that paradigm, she started an international grassroots movement called **We Are The ARK, for Acts of Restorative Kindness.**

Homemade signs stating, “This is an ARK,” are key to the success of the movement, she writes. Displayed in every ARK, these signs “explain away the inherent cultural shame of a messy garden or landscape and instead mark out the owner as a proud part of a new and kinder world... where we are... caretakers of the earth.” She tells us with passionate pizzazz and precision how to do this — and the results have been so “... inspiring and empowering for people, it goes way beyond the satisfaction of changing their lightbulbs...”

Her chapters include:

***ARKS and the Great Remembering***, in which you will read about the genesis of the ARK movement, her take on the state of the garden industry, which she calls “the Great Forgetting,” and why we need to be “Guardians, not Gardeners.”

***The Science Bit and ARKing Aims***, which starts with the startling statement: “Every generation has less and less awareness of what a truly healthy living landscape should look like.” The more formal term for this is *shifting baseline anomaly*. It means we look at a landscape in poor shape compared to a pre-industrial baseline, celebrate it as natural, and think this the way it always was.

In Colorado, we forget that ancient pines with massive diameters grew on the mountains, that the prairie was luxuriant with grasses and birds rather than houses and cars, that we are living in a pale shadow of what was before. Reynolds is asking us to stop accepting this and do what we can to restore what we can, together. She tells us that each small city ARK is a desperately needed habitat refuge, which has the potential to grow seeds for future circles of re-wilding.

Pay attention, she tells us in good permaculture style, to nurturing the edges where two different life zones meet, where life is most diverse — for instance, trees and field, stone walls and ponds, even paths. She reminds us of the laws of interdependence, biodiversity, and finite resources as we do this, to amplify effects and conserve every precious native plant that pops up.

The book then delves into ***ARK Design and First Steps, the Plant Layers of an ARK, Developing a Diverse ARK Ecosystem*** — meadows and woodlands instead of lawns. Reynolds advises next on ***Extra Layers of Creature Support and Minding the Tiny and Invisible Kingdoms*** — “Reversing Insectageddon” (the grievous decline in the number of pollinating and other insects worldwide) and minding “The Kingdoms Beneath our Feet.”

In ***Grow Your Own Food!*** she then turns to instructions on feeding ourselves and neighbors by nourishing the soil critters (discussed in the previous chapter) who make it possible. Her last chapter, ***Wider ARKevism*** touches on re-wilding habitat on school, public, and commercial lands and persuading politicians to pursue this paradigm.

Reynolds’ writing is compelling and clear. This is highly recommended as a first primer on re-wilding and gardening, or for a book group. For more experienced re-wilders seeking to galvanize neighbors or HOA committees, this book is a treasure of persuasive argumentation and pithy turns of phrase (though footnotes would have been welcome). The illustrations by Ruth Evans are one-of-a-kind artwork, conjuring the world of the tiny, the magical, the whimsical, the innocence of the small child, powerfully driving home the book’s guardianship theme.

For more info see this [short video](#) intro to the We Are the ARK movement, the beautiful [ARK website](#) alive with advice and inspiration, and both the 12-minute PBS

video, Wild Hope, and the Guardians not Gardeners video posted there.

The book is awesome. However, one word for Coloradans: Reynolds lives in Ireland, a very wet climate. People in wet climates don't worry as much about fires. Here in the arid U.S. West, home fire mitigation precludes much of this kind of "pollinator messy" landscaping. Insurance companies are already telling residents who have experienced wildfire that they won't renew their policies until they fire mitigate around their homes. Fire mitigation practices can include shorter native plants and a few widely spaced shrubs, but brush piles or dead wood lying rotting on the ground or standing tall within 30 feet of the house are fuel for fire and thus hazards in our climate.

More and more Coloradans are asking how can we both mitigate for fire around our house and also create optimum pollinator habitat (for tips, see [Fire Resistant Landscaping and Colorado Native Plants](#), a resource in the WOFR Toolkit). This question is only going to get more acute as time goes on. I anticipate we will continue getting thoughtful answers from experts in both fire mitigation and pollinator fields as they come together more and more to discuss this.

Despite this caveat, this book is a wonderful advocate for best practices to restore native habitats in urban settings. Similar recommendations for urban (and other) areas are also clearly stated in the recently published [Colorado Native Pollinating Insects Health Study](#). Both sources provide the strategic baseline we need for our state.

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## Upcoming Events

*Check out our website's [Events](#) section for registration links and full event details!*

### **PLANT SWAPS!**

***Pikes Peak***: Saturday, June 1

***Northern Colorado***: Saturday, June 1

***Boulder***: Sunday, June 2

***Denver***: Saturday, June 22

### **Garden Crawl**

***Northern Colorado***

Sunday, June 9

*Members only*

### **Pop-Up Native Plant Hike**

***Douglas/Elbert Counties***

Tuesday, June 11

### **Tour Jack's Solar Garden**

Friday, June 14

### **Garden Crawl**

***Jefferson County***

Saturday, June 29

*Members only*





Amazing tours and turnout for our Denver Garden Crawl!

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



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