



WILD
ONES®

Front Range



"When fireweed turns to cotton, summer will soon be forgotten."
Photo by Thomas Muller, courtesy of Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

August 2024

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Colorado Native Plant Gardening Myths Take 3

By Deb Lebow Aal

Thanks to Kristine Johnson for her assistance on this article.

A few years ago, we published two articles on Colorado native plant gardening myths. They were wildly popular, and the issues discussed in those articles still surface when talking gardening, so, they bear repeating. I am updating the original posts with new information. It also bears repeating that I am not a scientist or a professional landscaper, botanist, or horticulturist. I am just an avid gardener who reads gardening books and scientific studies on plants like they are novels.

Many of these myths pertain to all gardening, not just gardening with native plants. And, there is usually no right or wrong answer to a gardening question. The answer is usually "it depends." But, here are some answers backed up by science.

Myth 1: Needles from pine trees acidify your soil

No, they don't. A common misconception is that since pine needles from pine trees are acidic, when they drop, they will acidify your soil. Fresh pine needles taken directly from a tree are slightly acidic, and after a few days on the ground, are not acidic at all. Scientists have looked under 50-year old pine trees, with 50 years of dropped pine needles, and have not found the soil underneath the tree acidic. It turns out that adding pine needles to top-dress your soil is a good idea. They will help enrich your soil and will not blow away. See [this post](#) by the Colorado State University El Paso County Extension.



[Pine Needle Mulch](#) — photo and blog post (linked) by Jon K Fitzgerald, courtesy of Jefferson County Master Gardeners

Myth #2: Always deadhead your perennials

Once a plant's blooms are past their prime, the plant directs its energy towards

producing seed and fruit. Conventional advice is to deadhead – or remove spent blooms – so that the plant can direct its energy instead to producing more blooms, foliage, and roots. While it is true that deadheading some perennials will give you a second bloom, that is not always good advice. Leaving your spent blooms on your plants is good for wildlife and can add winter interest. If you always deadhead your perennials, you are robbing birds and insects of important shelter and food. Also, letting seed fall to the ground encourages self-seeding which may be desirable. That said, cutting some perennials back in the spring before they start “waking up” can make the plant stronger and less leggy. But, that is not the same as deadheading; that is spring cleaning your garden.

Myth #3: Wood chip mulch takes nitrogen away from your soil/plants

Well, yes and no. Wood has a high carbon to nitrogen ratio. So, for wood to break down, it needs to take nitrogen from somewhere. The early stages of wood decomposition are aided by fungi, which add nitrogen to the wood by taking some from the top inches of soil. This is done above most plant roots, so it will not affect your plants, unless they are seedlings. Wood chips are not recommended for [vegetable gardens](#), for this reason. When bacteria enter the process, they pull nitrogen from the surface of the soil. Again, this does not affect your plants. In the later stages of decomposition, wood chips actually add nitrogen to the soil.

Myth #4: Gravel mulch is too hot and adds heat to urban areas

Yes, the heat-island effect is a real thing. Urban areas are often 5 to 10 degrees hotter than surrounding areas because of all the concrete, asphalt and buildings. Too much impervious surface and lack of green space is not a good thing. But, gravel mulch does not have to be part of the problem. Gravel mulch is pervious, allowing water to percolate in, which is a good thing. In fact, while the top of the gravel mulch may be hot, underneath, the soil and roots of the plant stay cooler than they would in wood chip mulch. It conserves soil moisture very well – better than you might expect. So, half-inch size crusher (sharp, not rounded, pea gravel) gravel, laid 2-3 inches deep is recommended, and excellent mulch for Colorado native plants. Do note that gravel mulch is a mined product and mining has serious environmental consequences. So, if you want to use gravel mulch, best to look around for recycled materials – gravel that someone doesn't want anymore. For more information, see this CSU Extension fact sheet, [Mulches for Home Grounds](#).

Want to read more Native Plant Garden Myths? There are twelve in this article for you!

[Read the full blog post here!](#)

How Native Should My Garden Be?

By Deb Lebow Aal

The question of how many native plants, or native plant species, a garden should contain to be considered a native plant garden, comes up all the time. We should probably be asking ourselves instead, “When does my garden become ecologically beneficial?”

If you really want to support the ecosystem, the prevailing wisdom is that your landscape/garden should contain at least 70 percent native plants (that's biomass, not number of plants). The more native plants you have, the more likely you are to get to that tipping point, when your garden is going to support more wildlife, more insects, and become ecologically significant. There is some research backing up the 70 percent number (see blog post of this article linked below). A 2018 article in Smithsonian Magazine concluded that suburban yards with less than 70 percent native plant biomass could not sustain nesting Carolina chickadees. This research is east-coast centric, and while there is research going on in the west to see if numbers like these can be replicated here, we have yet to see results.

Wild Ones Front Range chapter (thank you, Jen Smith) came up with the following statement, which we feel reflects our values:

“We support everyone who wants to add more native plants to their part of the Front Range, from a handful to a yard full. Each native plant that you add provides a landing place, food source, and/or a nesting site for local wildlife. The more native plants there are, the bigger the impact! If your goal is to create a sustainable biodiverse habitat, we suggest incorporating at least 70 percent native species into your landscape.”

What about nativars or cultivars? Do they have the same ecological value as the straight native species?

So, we first have to define some terms. These definitions come from the national Wild Ones' website, unless otherwise noted.

A *native plant species* “is one that occurs naturally in a particular region, ecosystem and/or habitat, and was present prior to European settlement. These plants have held an ecological niche in our landscape for centuries and reproduce, primarily, through open pollination. These plants are sometimes referred to as straight-species or wild-type natives.” Doug Tallamy and Rick Darke, in their book, [The Living Landscape](#), offer another definition: “a plant or animal that has evolved in a given place over a period of time sufficient to develop complex and essential relationships with the physical environment and other organisms in a given ecological community.”

A *cultivar* is “any plant that is developed or selected for its desirable characteristics and maintained by propagation. Cultivars are reproduced through cloning methods such as grafting, cutting, root divisions, layering, tissue culture, etc.”



Pawnee Buttes Sand Cherry — this nativar is a low-growing, creeping form of the native Western Sand Cherry shrub (*Prunus besseyi*). Photo courtesy of [Conservation Garden Park](#).

A *nativar* is “a cultivar that came from a straight-species native plant. Nativars are propagated for many reasons: flower colors or forms, compact size, insect or disease resistance, tolerance of certain environmental conditions, and more. Nativars can be a native plant that is a genetic variant found in nature that is then selected and propagated to retain a particular or unique aspect. They can also be obtained through the process of artificial selection in which plant breeders grow plants with desirable characteristics and eliminate those with less desirable characteristics.”

Want to learn more about why Wild Ones has a policy advocating for selecting straight-species native plants?

[Read the full blog post here!](#)

Chapter News

Volunteering and Socializing Opportunities

- ***Garden Volunteers (Denver region)*** — Help us tackle the weeds at this lovely, mostly native garden in central Denver. We meet every Friday morning from 8:30 to about 10:00 am. The garden is in front of the city’s greenhouses just east of York Street along 23rd Avenue. No experience needed – we’ll show you what to focus on. It’s a great way to learn more about native plants, help the city, and meet others in our local native plant community. No need to commit to every Friday. Drop in as your schedule allows. [Email us](#) for more info or just [sign up for a shift here](#).
- ***Social Hours (Northern and Denver regions)*** — Denver is the latest region to host a Monthly Social Hour! Both Denver and Northern regions gather on the *second Sunday of each month from 2:00 - 3:30* to share successes and challenges, and general information about our gardens and native plants. Feel free to bring a picture of your garden and any questions you have. Exact address will be provided upon registration. [Register here](#) on our Events Page for either region.
- ***Chapter-Wide Fall Member Social & Potluck (September 15)*** — Members and your families, let's come together and connect with other garden enthusiasts for a free chapter-wide gathering and potluck lunch. Door prizes will include Wild Ones swag and must-have gardening gadgets and thought-provoking garden books! Contact [Sue Parilla](#) with questions or [Register here](#).



Plant Spotlight

Fireweed

By Pam Sherman

Origin of the name — Fireweed recolonizes burnt soil rapidly and thoroughly after a fire via rhizomes, if the plant was there before, or via fluffy windblown seed from elsewhere. It was one of the dominant plants recolonizing Mt. St. Helens after that volcano blew big time in 1980. Fireweed popped up all over London after it was firebombed in World War II. We see fireweed in abundance in our area.



Chamerion angustifolium is its botanical name in Flora of Colorado. Photo by Thomas Muller, courtesy of Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

Fireweed Ecology — This plant is found [all over the world](#) in boreal and temperate climates, but not where it's too hot or very dry. It likes all kinds of disturbed, sunny habitats, preferably with some moisture and is fine with a range of soils. It has amazingly wide and adaptable [genetics](#) and an almost 100 percent germination rate [when tested](#).

Hoofed mammals like to eat it in the bud stage, before it flowers (due to lower tannins). Smaller mammals eat the seeds. Pollinators of all kinds, from hummingbirds to flies and beetles, revel in its abundant nectar and pollen. It normally uses pollinator services for fertilization but can self-fertilize if it's been a bad year and it absolutely has to.

Ecosystem restoration professionals say it's outstanding in stabilizing soil, reclaiming mountainsides and [accumulating and recycling nutrients](#).

Fireweed's Human Uses — Fireweed is a major honeybee plant, important

commercially. For millenia its shoots have been eaten as new spring greens. Its stems and piths (stem's insides) have been eaten raw, boiled, steamed, used to flavor soups and stews, and turned into vinegar and ale. [Leaves have been dried and used for tea.](#) Humans made rope and string and wove nets and other items from its stem fibers, and have woven the seeds, along with feathers from ducks and hair from dogs and goats, into blankets and mats.

Pollinator Gardening — It's fabulous for pollinator gardens (see Ecology above). It can tend to take over, though. If it does, cut it back before seed set, but first plant it near growing shade, which will be able to knock it back some. Of course remove plants as desired, but be careful and thorough. Why? Fragmenting its rhizomes by cutting when digging will make it send up new shoots. If desired, replant with another ground cover or shrub that can give it some competition. Fireweed has a low flammability rating, so it's fine to plant near the house.

Cautions — Don't confuse fireweed with [Purple loosestrife](#) or [Dame's rocket](#) or [Hairy willowherb](#), all of which are on [Colorado's Invasive Weed List](#).

Further reading:

[US Forest Service](#)

[FEIS: Fire Effects Information Service \(USDA/USFS\)](#)

[Kathy Keeler A Wandering Botanist](#)

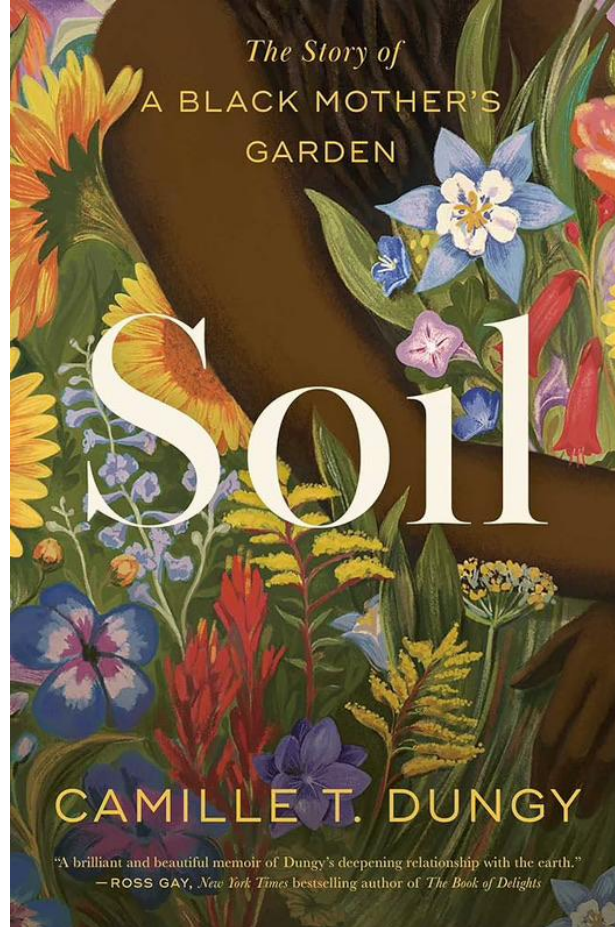
[CoNPS: Fireweed, the Fire Follower](#)

[University of Colorado Museum of Natural History: Fireweed](#)

Book Review

Soil, The Story of a Black Mother's Garden

Review by Janis Zloto



After applying for a Guggenheim Fellowship twenty times, Camille Dungy's persistence pays off and she is awarded this prestigious honor in 2019. While on sabbatical from Colorado State University, with the intention of devoting 2020 to writing poetry, the premise for *Soil, The Story of a BLACK MOTHER'S GARDEN* unfolds. The synchronicity of the Fellowship coupled with the Covid Pandemic chaos upends the author's plans to write eight hours a day for one year. But writes she does, in spite of many obstacles.

Camille and family settled in Fort Collins, Colorado in 2013, buying a home surrounded by the monoculture of dandelions sprinkled with bindweed, suffocating landscape fabric, a plethora of river rock, and "impenetrable soil." Like many new gardeners, she acknowledges she has limited landscaping expertise but is committed to learn and engage others to help. "We should all take time to plant life in the soil, even when planting isn't easy." In spite of many obstacles she encounters, digging roots in community and soil is a journey the author embraces wholeheartedly.

Planting life in a poison-free yard, per the words of Camille, invites surprises and lessons. It teaches balance in the life cycle of gardens as well as our own lives. It teaches time management during a busy life of motherhood, family and work. It offers agency to create a harmonious environment which supports Mother Nature. It increases our serotonin levels as we dig the earth with our bare hands. The beauty of Camille's creation simply feeds her soul.

What is his/herstory of the land we till? Who were the people, animals and plants inhabiting our gardens? As Camille digs and plants she reflects on people before her who worked to preserve the environment and pursue social justice. How do we mitigate the damage already done with overuse of pesticides and herbicides, atmospheric carbon dioxide overload, with humanity's exponential growth and simultaneous environmental destruction? Gardening, according to Camille, reconnects

us to life, to the “ethics of generosity and grace.” It helps us understand that change happens and often shows up differently than anticipated, and that one small native plant garden can be a vehicle for positive change.

Soil blends lessons learned about love, birth, death, racism, misogyny, and politics with the enriched soil the author creates. From this churning of external events with inner musings, Camille poetically teaches us how to nurture life: “Gardening gives us patience to value all lives.”

Camille Dungy’s memoir adds to the emerging literature supporting native plant gardens. As Doug Tallamy ([Homegrown National Parks](#), HNP) explains, this grassroots (minus the grass!) movement encourages planting “native on 50 percent of private land to restore biodiversity”. All life on this planet “needs diverse, productive ecosystems to survive.”

Yes to that! Yes to organizations like HNP and Wild Ones who help us navigate the path forward and inspire us to be committed to change. Yes to learning by doing, getting to know plant cycles so that we may be their protectors not their obliterators. Yes to Camille Dungy’s efforts and passionate love for gardening - may it infuse us with the commitment to preserve life on this planet while living harmoniously with Nature.

Janis Zloto has been a Midwife for the past 4 1/2 decades. She currently midwives her native plant garden and tends Ekar, the Wild One’s Demonstration Garden since 2021.

Upcoming Events

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

Northern Region Monthly Social

Sunday, September 8
Members only

Denver Region Monthly Social

Sunday, September 8

Fall Front Range Chapter All-Member Social & Potluck

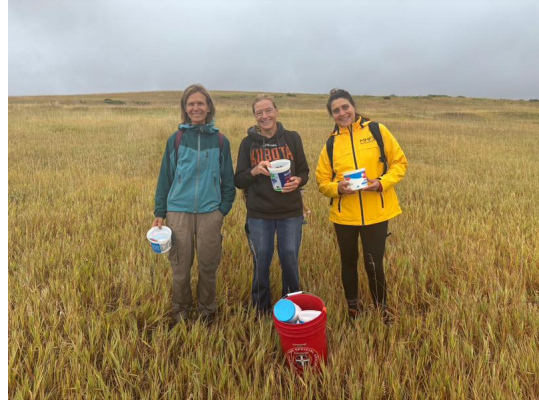
Sunday, September 15
Open to ALL WOFR Members!

WOFR September Board Meeting

Wednesday, September 18
Members only

"The Beauty and Benefits of Hedgerows" with Heather McCargo

Thursday, September 19
Online/Virtual (hosted by Wild Ones National)



Volunteers from WOFR 2024 Seed Collection and Cleaning Events

We love hearing from you!
If you would like to comment on anything in this newsletter or write an article, please [email us](#) your comments or ideas.

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



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