



WILD
ONES®

Front Range



Bouteloua gracilis (Blue Grama Grass)
Photo courtesy of www.fireflyforest.net

October 2024

In this newsletter...

- **Feature Articles:** Consider Rewilding Your Yard With Aggressive Native Plants; Garden Thugs
- **Plant Spotlight:** Rubber Rabbitbrush (*Ericameria nauseosa*)
- **Chapter News:** Board Nominations; Plant Swap Leads Wanted; WOFR In The News
- **Book Review:** The Living Landscape
- **Upcoming Events:** Socials, Seed Intakes, Garden Crawls, Seed Collecting, and "Matrix Landscape Design"

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WOFR is now accepting new board member nominations!

If you'd like to nominate someone (including yourself!), [email us](#) and scroll down for more info!

Consider Rewilding Your Yard With Aggressive Native Plants

By Jonathan Sciarcon

Based on online posts in the Colorado Native Plant Gardening room on Facebook and in-person conversations with Wild Ones members, it appears that most gardeners, even ones who advocate planting native plants, want well behaved flora in their yards or gardens. This makes sense as many gardeners' aesthetic preferences tend towards some sort of order or design in the landscape. As someone who advocates for diversity when it comes to landscape/garden design, I am not trying to convince everyone to turn their yards into a Darwinian struggle between the most aggressive native plants, even if this is my own gardening preference. However, I would like gardeners in Colorado to consider some of the benefits of intentionally cultivating aggressive native plants in their yards.

Keystone Plants

Many of the most aggressive native plants are Keystone species in regional ecosystems and so are essential for insect and bird survival. For example, *Prunus virginiana* (Chokecherry, a shrub/small tree) and *Prunus Americana* (American plum, also a shrub/small tree) are two of the most important host plants throughout much of the Front Range. Both plants support well over one hundred species of caterpillars in addition to providing early season nectar and pollen to insects and mid-season fruit for birds and other wildlife. Many gardeners are afraid to plant these shrubs/small trees because of their tendency to sucker and re-seed in the yard. It is true that these plants spread easily in many situations. Yet, allowing these plants to form colonies protects the watershed and enriches the ecosystem.

This past spring, I noticed a Spotted Towhee had taken up residence in a *Prunus virginiana* thicket in my backyard. In July, I noticed birds and squirrels spending a significant amount of time collecting fruit from this thicket. As Doug Tallamy has noted, around five percent of genera support approximately 70-75 percent of our native

caterpillars and over 95 percent of native birds depend on caterpillars to rear their young* (footnote in article blog post linked below). According to current research, the *Prunus* genera is roughly tied with the *Salix* (Willow) genera when it comes to hosting caterpillars, trailing only the *Quercus* (Oak) family. On the Front Range, it is likely that *Prunus* and *Salix* are, in some order, first and second as our native Oaks are more prevalent in the Foothills and southern and western parts of the state. Considering that *Prunus virginiana* and *Prunus americana* can survive drier conditions than most native *Salix* species, it follows that we should be adding these plants to our xeric or near xeric landscapes to promote as much biodiversity as possible.



Helianthus maximiliani

Photo by Lee Page courtesy of Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

Using *Helianthus* to Your Advantage

Another native plant that is often considered to be problematic in the garden is *Helianthus maximiliani* (Maximillian Sunflower). This is an aggressive, low water perennial in the Sunflower family that spreads by both seed and rhizomes to form larger colonies. Many gardeners who recognize this plant's importance as both a host plant and nectar source for mid to late season pollinators suggest placing *Helianthus maximiliani* in areas where it will not spread. However, I have used it throughout my yard to combat invasive or noxious non-native plants and to keep other aggressive native plants in check. For example, I have introduced *Helianthus maximiliani*, which has allelopathic properties, in concert with other aggressive natives (especially *Solidago* sp., *Helianthus annuus*, and *Pascopyrum smithii*) in parts of my yard that have Field Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*), Creeping Bellflower (*Campanula rapunculoides*), and Prickly Lettuce (*Lactuca serriola*). Over the past three years the *Helianthus* and its companion plants have spread and either helped reduce or eliminate the problematic non-native plants in these areas. I was especially shocked but pleasantly surprised to see the reduction in Creeping Bellflower this year.

Want to learn more about groundcovers, common questions, and the overall benefits related to using aggressive native plants?

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

Jonathan Sciarcon (above in his article “Consider Rewilding Your Yard With Aggressive Native Plants”) has made a great case for strategically placing what he calls aggressive native plants, and what I call garden thugs, in your yard. I heartily agree with his arguments, and have a few more to add to the list.

First a definition of a garden thug. It is a plant that is annoyingly overenthusiastic. It starts out in the place you wanted it, and ends up – everywhere! Now, if you are starting with a blank slate and want to fill up your yard fast, these are just the plants for you! But, if you like at least a little bit of order, or if you have a rather small yard, you will want to know more about these plants before including them, or know that you will be editing out quite a bit. I am not saying avoid these – they are great Colorado native plants, just know what you’re dealing with.

We are not talking about noxious weeds, or invasive plants on the noxious weeds list. That’s a whole different category of plants that are not native, and should be avoided at all costs. Here is the [Colorado invasive plants list](#).

With all of the plants listed below, despite the fact that they are thugs, I keep most of them in my yard because they provide such stellar ecosystem services. You can control these thugs by cutting off the flowers before they’ve gone to seed, if that is the way they spread. If they spread via rhizomes, it’s a bit more work. And, since I actually like weeding, I am out there doing lots of editing.

Here are my additions to Jonathan’s list of garden thugs, from my experience.



Solidago rigida

Photo courtesy of Grow Native! [Missouri Prairie Foundation](#)

Baby Blue Rabbit brush (*Ericameria nauseosa*): Such a beautiful plant with its blue green foliage all year round, and yellow flowers so late in the season, but if you have one, you have many. I have been able to pull them out easily, where I don’t want them, but you have to be on top of them. An important plant for erosion control, with its very deep roots, and very xeric.

Stiff-leaved goldenrod (*Solidago rigida*): Also yellow flowers, and also a late-season

bloomer. It is everywhere in my yard. If you have what you consider “bad” soil, it doesn’t care, so put it there.

Chocolate Flower (*Berlandia lyrata*): When I started converting my garden to more natives, I put in chocolate flower, and it did not thrive. This did not make sense, as everyone I knew said it would grow anywhere. Well, once it took hold, it took hold! It likes the driest, most neglected corners of my garden, which is great! But, it does get rangy and unkempt looking if not cut back mid-season. The blooms are fabulous, it does smell like chocolate, and I would never be without this plant.

Want to see Deb’s full list of garden thug species to consider for your garden (she provides several more!)?

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

Chapter News

Now Accepting Board Member Nominations

WOFR is now accepting nominations for new board members. If you'd like to nominate someone (including yourself!) to serve on our board, [email us](#). Let us know the person's name and member number, and provide a brief description about why they are interested in serving on our board of directors. Watch for an email about casting your vote for our chapter's 2025 Board Members. Voting will take place from December 1 to December 15.

We have particular need for a new Treasurer. This position manages our finances, annually reports to national, and facilitates the annual budget process with input from chapter leaders. Attendance at our monthly board meetings on the third Wednesday of the month from 6-8 pm is required. Our current Treasurer will provide training. Accounting/bookkeeping experience is beneficial, but not required.

Wanted: Leads for the Plant Swap and Seed Swap



Every year Wild Ones Front Range Chapter hosts swaps and giveaways to promote Colorado native plants. Our native Plant Swap appeals to all gardening levels - newbies who want to try out native plants for the first time to seasoned gardeners who want to add to their native plant palette. Some people come looking specifically for a plant that attracts a certain pollinator... Or a shrub for that one dry spot... Or a certain color flower for fall bloom. We offer thousands of plants!

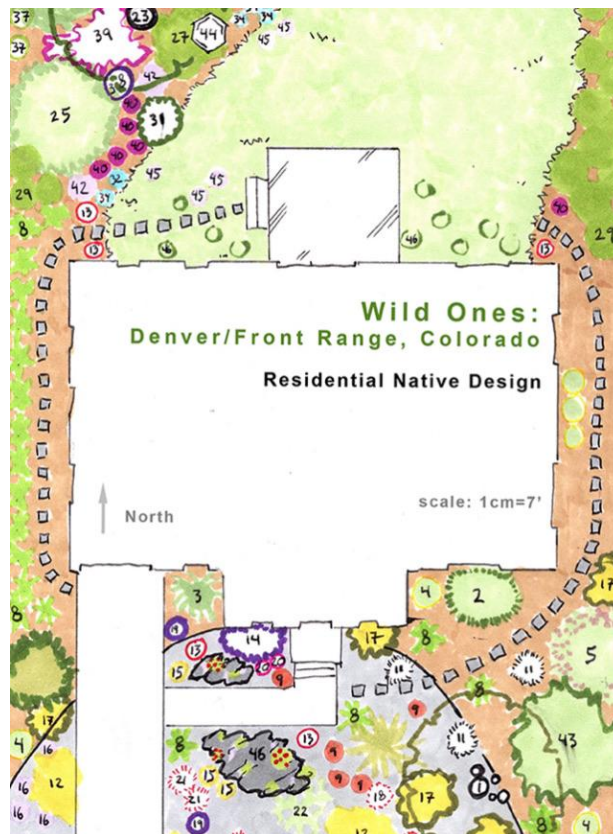
Our native plant seed swap encourages gardeners to learn about seeds. Native plant seeds are a gateway into native plant gardening, and an economical way to get started, or add to your palette.

These are our most popular events - and we need help! The events take thoughtful planning and volunteer management. Please [email us](#) if you are interested in taking a lead role in these incredibly impactful events.

WOFR and Native Plants in the News

Always good to get publicity! This past month, native plants got lots of attention in the local and national press. Here are just three examples:

- Boulder Magazine (September edition) featured an article titled, “[Gardening that Gives Back](#),” featuring the WOFR Denver plant swap and providing lots of information on how to plant native plants.
- [Denver Post article](#) (September 20, 2024) showcased the West Wash Park neighborhood in Denver converting front yards into “native plant havens,” and gave a shout out to Board member Deb Lebow Aal
- The wonderful Margaret Roach of the New York Times did a whole article on Wild Ones (September 11, 2024), titled, “[Native Plants Can be Hard to Plant, but Help is Here](#).” The article highlights the native plant designs that Wild Ones has on their web site. Here is a link to the [Front Range design](#).



Plant Spotlight

Rubber Rabbitbrush
Ericameria nauseosa

By Karen Vanderwall

Following the hot northern Colorado summer, my husband and I ramp up our time spent outdoors hiking the trails of Horsetooth and Lory parks or jumping on our bikes riding the paths in and around Fort Collins. With native flowering plants in the garden and in the wild winding down, one of the surprising delights that greet us is the bright yellow bushy blooms and silvery leaves of the Rubber Rabbitbrush.



Photo by Deb Lebow Aal

Last year I decided to plant a couple of Rubber Rabbitbrush in my native bed to enjoy and I have not been disappointed. They add beautiful fall color, have not required any watering, created more size variation in the garden and the pollinators love them. I use them more as an accent shrub but I'm sure they would look great as a background shrub for summer flowering plants.

Rubber Rabbitbrush, *Ericameria nauseosa*, is in the Aster family, Asteraceae. It is a round shaped woody shrub that grows two to six feet wide and two to four feet tall producing small clusters of bright yellow flowers from late summer to mid-fall followed by white fluffy seed heads lasting into winter. It is a perennial and native to all western U.S. states growing at between 5000 and 9000 feet elevation. It is a drought tolerant shrub with deep roots. In the late winter/early spring it's a good idea to cut the plant back to about one foot to help maintain the plant's natural globe shape and to keep the plant dense (CSU Extension Plant Talk). According to the City of Fort Collins, there are eight varieties of Rubber Rabbit Brush native to Colorado.

As the species name (*nauseosa*) implies, some people dislike the smell as it reminds them of oil or rubber (some people apparently think it smells like pineapple). I have found that the smell is not strong at all and it only has an odor if the flowers or stems are crushed.

A wide array of birds and native insects are attracted to Rubber Rabbitbrush. They provide seeds and shelter for birds and nectar and pollen for butterflies and other pollinators. It is one the few native plant species from the Front Range to the Cascade Range and Sierra Nevada mountains that provides habitat for pollinators during the late summer and fall months.

An interesting fact is the common name, Rubber Rabbitbrush, refers to the rubber content in the sap and it was actually tested as a source of rubber during World War II. Like nearly every native plant, Rubber Rabbitbrush varieties have been used by several tribes for various purposes. There are three main Native American traditional uses of *Ericameria nauseosa* varieties. The yellow flowers were used to dye clothing and crafts. The branches were used by several tribes to make baskets. Some tribes boiled the dried leaves and flowers in water and were used to relieve arthritis. And it was used ceremonially as a tea for unwanted spirits to treat, for example, nightmares.

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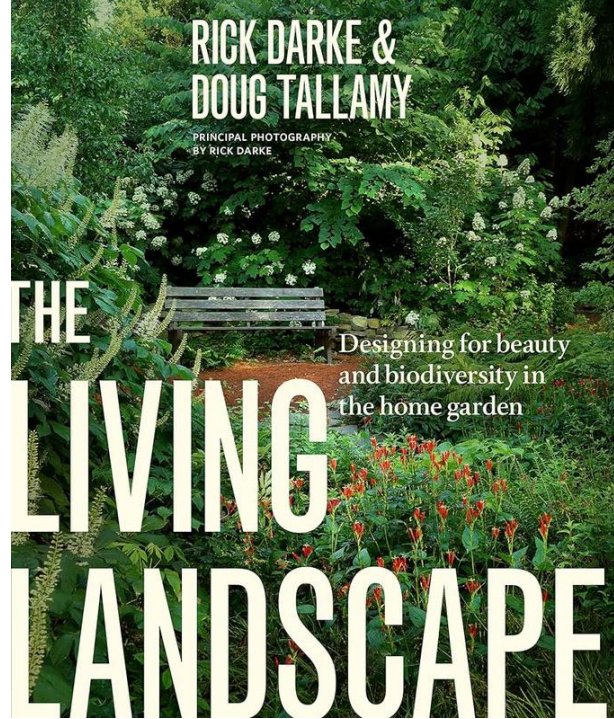
USDA NRCS (Natural Resource Conservation Service) Rubber Rabbitbrush, *Ericameria nauseosa* Plant Guide: 1741 - Rabbitbrush

Utah Native Plant Society. <http://www.unps.org/>

Book Review

The Living Landscape: Designing for beauty and biodiversity by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy

Review by Pam Sherman



Had you ever heard of this book, co-written by Wild Ones' lifetime honorary director, [Doug Tallamy](#)?

It seems to be a gem hidden in plain sight. We all know of Tallamy's work advocating for native plants and native ecosystems. Co-author, [Rick Darke](#) is a landscape designer, photographer, Curator of Plants at Longwood Gardens (PA) for 20 years, winner of numerous awards, including the Scientific Award of the American Horticultural Society, and author of books in this field.

At 392 pages, this hardcover publication is replete with gorgeous photos—of mid-Atlantic landscapes. The text is entirely focused there, but then so is all of Tallamy's work. Why are we reviewing this for Colorado? As with his other works, its principles of native ecosystem design apply everywhere.

Why did they write this book and why should we read it?

The authors, like most of us, are very excited about the “untapped regenerative power of America's landscapes.” (p.110) They explain how to unleash this power through landscape layering of native plants from earth to sky and across the land: “The richness of life in any given landscape is generally linked to the richness and intricacy of its layering.” (p.11) So: “Reintroducing layers to residential landscapes is the best strategy for restoring biological function on a vast scale.” (p.13)

What is layering?

Populating and filling niches in the vertical and horizontal landscape.

Chapter One, *Layers in Wild Landscapes*, introduces the layers using the wild as template. The vertical layers, or habitats, they describe are: the ground layer (including but not limited to soil and ground covers), herbaceous layer (wildflowers/forbs), shrubs, understory trees, canopy trees, vines and mushrooms which can span all the layers, from ground to canopy.

More specifically, they write: “the ground layer and its intricate living processes are often overlooked in gardening circles, yet the events that occur here are among the most important to life in the entire ecosystem.” In Colorado we would add native

grasses to the ground and forb layers and in some places ignore the tree layers, which can be minimal to non-existent on native prairie, grasslands, steppe, shrublands.

The authors define horizontal (lateral) layers as “dynamic edges, wet edges, wetlands, meadows and grasslands.”

What is an edge?

“In ecological terms, edge is a local transition zone where two different habitats or ecosystems meet. The edge can also be recognized as a habitat in itself.” (p.53) “Some of the most productive, biologically diverse habitats are edges where woodlands meet consistently moist grounds or wetlands.” (p.59) In Colorado we might settle for ephemeral (seasonal) wet areas, restore ephemeral streams to consistent flow, or create simple backyard substitutes (a dish of shallow water for insects, a small kiddie wading pool). The authors discuss the ecological functions of each vertical and horizontal layer, and explain layers in terms of time (succession and seasons) as well as space.

Chapter Two, *The Community of Living Organisms: Why Interrelationships Matter More Than Numbers*. Here they introduce the importance of specialized ecological relationships, and the relationship of biodiversity with both an ecosystem’s productivity and its stability over time. Chapter Three, *The Ecological Functions of Gardens*, touches on ecosystem complexity and its benefits for humans and wildlife. Chapter Four, *The Art of Observation*, offers brief observations on charting the landscape’s colors, comments on scales of life, the ecosystem value of old logs and biomimicry.

Chapter Five, *Applying Layers to the Home Garden* introduces: “Space-making with Organic Architecture,” meaning native plants. They write: “Among limitless possibilities, garden spaces can function as outdoor living rooms, playgrounds, bathing or swimming rooms, stages, shelters, museums, wildlife habitats, workshops, nurseries, or food-producing areas. Well-built garden spaces offer living experiences unlike anything that can be attained with indoor architecture.” (p.135) The chapter briefly discusses each vertical and horizontal layer as applied to the home garden/landscape. There’s also a sub-section on creating a natural bird bath/insect water source from a rock and one on the pros and cons of hybrids.

The last section is a list of selected plants with ecological and landscape functions for different parts of the U.S. The sections pertaining to Colorado are *Selected Plants for the Southwest* (85 plants, compiled by Tucson designer) and *Selected Plants for the Midwest and Mountain States*, which features predominantly midwest, not mountain states, plants. However, we have enough CSU Extension plant lists to make up for this information gap.

Reading this book is like sitting down for a fascinating visit with the authors as they talk and tell stories about layering in design, the key to ecosystem vibrancy, wonder, beauty and enjoyment. This engaging book can stimulate curiosity about working with our own layers here in Colorado, however many or few there may be.

Upcoming Events

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

Boulder Regional Social and Seed Intake
Sunday, October 6

Northern Region Fort Collins Garden Crawl

Sunday, October 13

Members only

Denver Region Monthly Social Hour

Sunday, October 13

Pikes Peak Region Native Seed Collecting

Wednesday, October 16

Members only

WOFR October Board Meeting

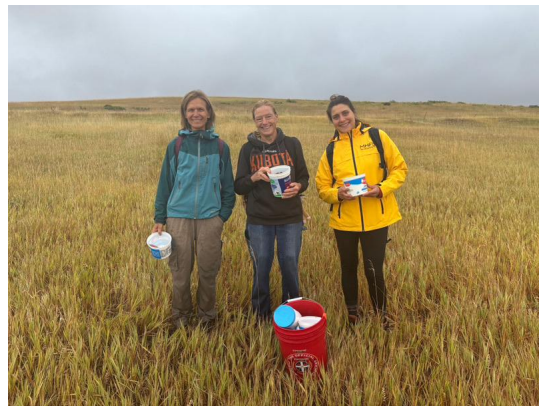
Wednesday, October 16

Members only

"Matrix Landscape Design" with Benjamin Vogt

Thursday, October 24

Hosted by Wild Ones Omaha Tallgrass Prairie (Seedling) Chapter and 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.

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