WILD ONES®
Front Range

Early Spring view of Roxborough State Park showing extensive Gambel Oak forests. Photo by R. Phillips

May 2025

In this newsletter...

- ***Upcoming Events: Plant Swaps, Hikes, and more!***

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Multi-Stem Native Trees and Large Shrubs for Colorado Landscapes

By Paul Alaback and Kristine Johnson *(article link)*

Why Use Multi-Stemmed Trees?

When we think of creating a native garden or landscape in the semi-arid West, we often conjure up an image of a dry prairie with many wildflowers and grasses, all adapted to hot dry conditions. While some places were historically prairie, all around Colorado we find streams, canyons, foothills or other geological or topographic features that include wetlands, riparian areas, shrublands, forests or woodlands. While these places with woody plants could sometimes occupy less than 10 percent of the landscape, in many cases they provided habitat for 70 percent or more of the bird species! If we want to use nature as a model for how to build our landscapes, then we might want to consider the value of adding woody species to our gardening projects that go beyond the typical large shade trees. This is especially important if a key aim is to create habitat for a wide number of bird and insect species.

Douglas Tallamy, in his popular books and lectures, has laid out why it is so important to create not just pleasant and aesthetically pleasing landscapes but to create habitat, making a significant contribution to helping maintain biodiversity, even in urban and suburban areas. Tallamy's examples often focus on the humid deciduous forests in the eastern and midwestern US, where an astounding diversity of insects and birds can be found. However, many of the principles he lays out can apply to our drier landscapes, including the overwhelming value of woody plants for insects and birds.

Bird and insect diversity is profoundly influenced by the number of layers of vegetation in an ecosystem. Think of rainforests with layer upon layer of vegetation from the ground to the top of a canopy. Each of these canopy layers has differences in humidity, temperature, wind, and chemical or physical characteristics of leaves, twigs, and branches. All these factors create a mosaic of habitats for insects, and all the animals that depend on them like birds. So, by creating more canopy layers, we provide more diverse habitats, which is what you see in many native habitats that include shrubbier vegetation.

Our native Gambel Oak (Quercus gambelii) is a biodiversity powerhouse, providing shelter and food for hundreds of species. It suckers to form a thicket and can be used along a fence for screening. Photo ©Al Schneider, http://www.swcoloradowildflowers.com

Willows deserve special mention. Often neglected in projects aiming to increase habitat for pollinators, willows are in fact key species for pollinators in many ecosystems. They provide prodigious amounts of early season pollen. Willows also host many species of plant-eating insects and their predators, in part due to their leaves having diverse chemistry and a good source of nutrients. Patches of willows and cottonwoods along streams or seeps are considered "biodiversity hotspots" in the western US due to the rich diversity in insects, birds and other wildlife that they typically support. If you have a moist

place in your yard, they can add a lot of habitat value to your yard. The Xerces Society, for example, highly recommends one of our native willows, the pussy willow (*Salix discolor)* for its habitat value for pollinators. Coyote willow (*S. exigua*) is also considered a keystone species for insects.

Here we want to highlight one group of woody plants that is key to creating this diversity but is often neglected in native plant gardens: multi-stemmed trees and large shrubs. These plants can fit in smaller urban and suburban spaces, add layers to your landscape, and provide many ecosystem services to both wildlife and people.

What are Multi-Stemmed Trees and Large Shrubs?

Acer glabrum pruned as a large multi-stem, shown before leaf-out in spring. This shrub is normally seen along riparian areas. In this suburban yard it receives mid afternoon shade from a pine tree and gets an occasional drink from a hose. (Photo by Linda Hellow.)

We include deciduous small trees and large shrubs in multi-stemmed trees and shrubs; most, but not all, are riparian. We focus on plants at least 6-to-10 feet in height, no taller than 25 feet at maturity. They do not have one central leader (stem or trunk); they can be “thicket forming” or “suckering.” This leads to good habitat for wildlife and good screening for privacy and wind. Our eyes have been trained to prefer large shade trees with a single trunk, but sited and cared for properly (ie, not improperly or overly pruned), these plants have a place in our gardens. In general, they are found in the following genera that are highly supporting:

- **Pollinators (NWF)**: *Prunus, Salix, Quercus, Betula, Alnus, Acer, Crataegus, Corylus, Amelanchier*
- **Birds (Audubon)**: *Prunus, Corylus, Sorbus, Lonicera, Ribes, Sambucus, Acer, Amelanchier, Salix, Shepherdia, Rhus, Betula*

Where/How?

Many of the species on this list are available at nurseries but often are not used in landscapes; some of them have attractive features such as flowers, berries, and/or fall color, and all have high habitat value to pollinators, a wide range of insects in general, and/or birds. Many of them can support 200 or more species of caterpillars, which are a key food source for birds. Some (particularly riparian) need extra thought about placement and culture; they should be placed in low or wet spots in yards or along ditches; they may need shade from taller trees or the north side of buildings, and/or they benefit from being

placed in rain gardens with adequate mulching to create a moist soil sponge that supports them through the heat of summer. (Consider exploring the work of Brad Lancaster.) Thicket forming/suckering plants can be directed and cared for; choose the right space and know how to care for them. They can be planted along chain link fences to create screening hedgerows, and if they have a linear space in which to spread they could also be planted in a semi shady narrow side yard. They can provide some cooling through shade and evapotranspiration to the western walls of any home while being appropriately sized for the space.

Support Riparian Species with a Rain Garden

When this rain garden is finished, it will capture rainwater from two downspouts to support several trees and shrubs. (Photo by Linda Hellow.)

The push to conserve water in our landscapes by moving away from lush lawns and thirsty non-native ornamental plants protects ecosystems, but careful and deliberate direction of precipitation can support more water-intensive native plants of high habitat value in our yards. For example, the creation of rain (and snow!) harvesting “basins,” fed by runoff from roofs and hard surfaces can double (or more) the water that falls from the sky. When such garden basins are well-mulched with organic matter, a “soil sponge” is created which will absorb and hold water for plants without creating anoxic conditions which kill plants and support mosquitos. For more information, seek out books, podcasts, and webinars featuring Brad Lancaster as well as the resources available at the Watershed Management Group in Tucson, AZ.

- Moist/or riparian species: need places with shade or moisture (understory, rain garden, north sides, higher elevations); rain gardens. (Kristine has a rain garden with the two *Acers*, the *Sambucus*, *Alnus*, and would like to add *Corylus*; *Betula* on the north side with special mulching.)
- Or… hedgerow (multiple selections are more xeric and tend to form thickets): for privacy screening along property lines, to break up wind. (Kristine has a chain link fence along two sides and didn’t want to put in wooden privacy fences. Instead, she has *Robinia*, *Quercus*, the two *Prunus*, *Forestiera*, *Shepherdia*; would like to add *Crataegus* and keep filling in.)

Multi-Stemmed Native Woody Plants
(Water use, according to CSU Extension publications or personal estimation-?)
Soapberry Family (Sapindacae)
Rocky Mountain maple (*Acer glabrum*) (L-M)
Big-toothed maple (*Acer grandidentatum*) (L-M)

Birch Family (Betulaceae)
Thinleaf alder (*Alnus tenuifolia*) (H)
Western water birch (*Betula occidentalis*) (H)
Beaked hazelnut (*Corylus cornuta*) (M-H?)

Rose Family (Rosaceae)
Western serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) (L-M)
Fleshy hawthorn (*Crataegus succulenta*) (M?)
American wild plum (*Prunus americana*) (L-M)
Pin-cherry (*Prunus pennsylvanica*) (M?)
Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) (M)
Mountain ash (*Sorbus scopulina*) (M)

Beech Family (Fagacae)
Gambel oak **(***Quercus gambelii*) (L-M)
Gray oak (*Quercus grisea*),(L-M?)
Sonoran scrub oak (*Quercus turbinella*) (L-M?)

Willow Family (Salicacae)
Pussy willow (*Salix discolo*r) (M-H?)
Coyote willow (*Salix exigua*)* (M-H?)
Bluestem willow (*Salix irrorata)* (M-H?)

Sumac Family (Anacardaceae)
Smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*) (L-M)

Honeysuckle Family (Caprifoliaceae)
Twinberry (*Lonicera involucrata) (M)?*

Gooseberry Family (Grossulaceae)
Golden currant (*Ribes aureum*) (M?)

Moschlatel Family (Adoxaceae)
Red elderberry (*Sambucus racemosum*) (M-H?)

Other
Desert olive (*Forestiera pubescens var. neomexicana*) (L)
Hoptree (*Ptelea trifoliata*) (M-H)
New Mexico locust (*Robinia neomexicana*) (L-M)
Silver buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*) (L-M)

Sources:

https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/native-trees-for-colorado-landscapes-7-421/
https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/native-shrubs-for-colorado-landscapes-7-422/
https://rockies.audubon.org/habitat-hero/resources
https://www.nwf.org/Native-Plant-Habitats/Plant-Native/Why-Native/Keystone-Plants-by-Ecoregion

Books available from Boulder Bookstore, Colorado Native Plant Society or online bookstores:

Douglas Tallamy. 2019. *Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard.*
Gwen Kittel. 2024. *Willows of Colorado, ecology and identification*.
Jack Carter. 2006. *Trees and Shrubs of Colorado.*

Visiting the Garden of a Living Legend: Jean Morgan

By Kristine Johnson (article link)

There is plenty of whimsy along with more than 200 species of native plants in Jean's garden. Photo by John Webb.

This year, Boulder County members will have the privilege of visiting the garden of Jean Morgan in Louisville not once, but twice, in April and again in September. We are so fortunate that she is being so generous with her time and her space so that more of us will be able to learn from her years of wisdom and experience. The theme of our visits has entirely to do with what we can learn from Jean: season extension. Jean has something blooming ten months of the year. If you think about it, most of our garden crawls happen in June, July, or August. It takes someone special to take on a spring or a fall tour, let alone both.

Jean in her garden. Photo by Sharon O'Brien

Jean started her garden in the 1970s, and she has been at it ever since. In gardening circles in Boulder County and far beyond, she is well known. When I visited her last summer, every square inch of her yard was filled with plants and garden personality, and I was pretty blown away. During what was an absolutely brutally hot and dry summer, she had plants well-adapted to heat and xeric conditions blooming to beat the band. (Who has the best Rocky Mountain *Zinnia grandiflora*? Jean does!) She also has an incredible sense of humor and her garden is packed with whimsy. (Who else has a hippo sculpture filled with wild petunia--*Ruellia humilis*? Jean does!) I was personally quite inspired, because so many of us are afraid of embracing xeric plants so boldly, and so often we tone down personal touches in our gardens.

Jean is a big fan of pollinators and birds, which show up both in her yard (birdbaths, plant choice) and attire (themed jewelry). She is patient with visitors and generous with her knowledge, having accrued so much insight over so many decades of dedicated gardening. She has been recognized by multiple conservation groups for her knowledge and support of native plants. She is on a first name basis with Panayoti Kelaidis, Senior

Curator and Director of Outreach at Denver Botanic Gardens, but so kind and gregarious that visitors can't help but soak up her gardening advice and enthusiasm.

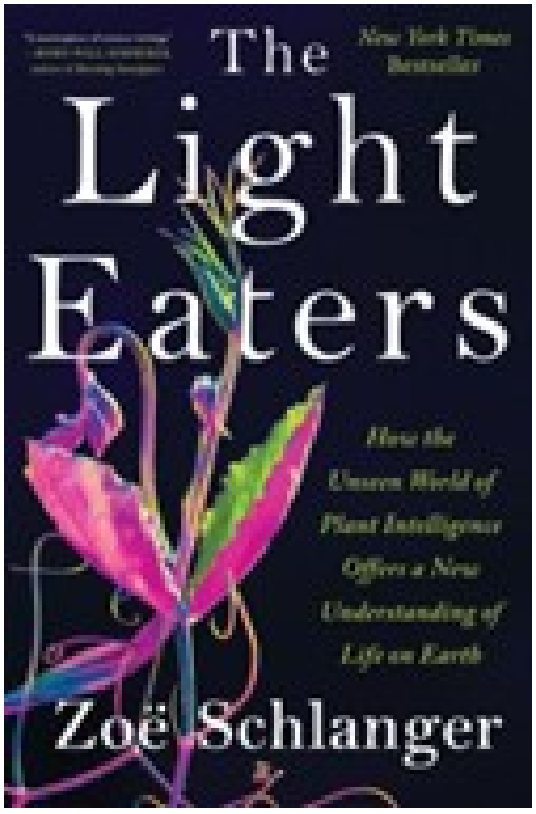
Tiger Swallowtail on a larkspur. Photo by Sharon O'Brien.

If you missed our visit in April, watch for an invitation to our second visit to Jean's garden early this fall. As with the first visit, we will spend an hour with Jean, chatting and learning, and then gather in Community Park for a brown bag social.

Book Review

The Light Eaters

(article link)



by Zoe Schlanger

Reviewed by Richard Phillips

They can eat light, isn't that enough?

Timothy Plowman, Ethnobotanist

Author, Zoe Schlanger, is a well-known writer for *The Atlantic* who got burned out reporting on climate change issues. She found that she could use her love of plants as a basis to report on the evolving science of plant intelligence, though she finds that plant scientists are generally averse to use the term “intelligence” with reference to plants.

Their reluctance to use that term goes back to the book, *The Secret Life of Plants*, published in 1973, and the subsequent documentary film of the same name, released in 1978, with a soundtrack by Stevie Wonder! I certainly remember that movie and I suspect many of you do also. The authors suggested that plants could feel and hear and even read our minds. They reported that plants reacted to music and preferred classical to rock and roll. You may have even been one of those who kept the stereo on for your plant’s enjoyment and stimulation. The book was a blend of poorly designed scientific experiments and unscientific projections. Much of what was reported has since been debunked, but the book and movie were great hits and caught people’s imaginations about the possibility that plants are capable of more than just photosynthesis.

Due to the uproar over the book’s lack of credibility, funding for rigorous plant consciousness research dried up. No funding organizations wanted to spend money on what was then considered to be poor science. Therefore, legitimate researchers changed research direction or went underground with their work. It became difficult to get their research published and when it was, their findings were rigorously disputed by mainstream plant scientists.

However, things have been changing radically over the last decade and a half. There is still a reluctance to use a term like plant intelligence, but good science confirms that plants are truly aware of their above-ground and below-ground surroundings and react to what they find. Scientists are at least willing to use a term like "plant consciousness."

The book is full of examples of how plants interact with their environment. Did you know that some plants are aware when something (you?) touches them and can make an appropriate response? If they detect that it is an insect eating them, some plants start producing toxic or noxious chemicals to stop the predation. Some plants even issue pheromones to warn their neighbors of an impending attack.

One of my favorite anecdotes is about corn plants, which are able to identify the specific species of caterpillar munching on them and then issue a pheromone that attracts the specific species of wasp that preys on that caterpillar.

Many plants have also been shown to favor relatives. Researchers found that if rows of sunflowers are planted with seeds from the same mother plant, they can get up to 47 percent more oil production than if the rows are planted with non-related seeds. Related plants were found to compete less for root space and to even adjust their leaf positions, so they do not shade their neighbors.

The book is full of stories like this. Even though the author is reporting on dry research studies, it is very readable. She discusses her conversations with the researchers and goes on field trips with some of them to see their work first-hand. She also blends in tales of her own love of plants and how her views have changed as she has learned more about their capabilities. She writes, "Hmmm. I wonder if they are actually feeling pain when I pick a flower?”

Once you read this book, you will no longer feel guilty about talking to your plants and giving them an extra drink of water on a hot day, just as you would treat your human friends.

A single plant is a marvel. A community of plants is life itself. It is the evolutionary past and future entangled into a riotous present in which we are ourselves also entangled. This stretches the mind.

Zoe Schlanger

Plant Profile

New Mexican Privet: *Forestiera pubescens*

By Karen Vanderwall (article link)

This month we are featuring the Colorado native: New Mexican Privet. Upon first learning of this shrub, I envisioned a privet – a dense, tough shrub trimmed into a hedge for a privacy screen. Well, as in many cases, and this one is a good example; a plant's common name can be deceptive. Although it does have a dense growth habit, the New Mexican Privet isn't a privet at all; it is in the Olive Family. The common names of *Forestiera pubescens* - such as New Mexico Olive, Desert Olive, Stretchberry, Elbow Bush and Texas Forsythia - do tell a lot about this fantastic shrub, but there is more to the story!

The New Mexico Privet is a deciduous small tree or large upright shrub growing from 8 feet to 12 feet high and 6 feet to 8 feet wide. It can be found from New Mexico to Southern Colorado and up into Utah at between 4200 and 7300 feet in elevation.

Forestiera is drought tolerant and can be pruned as a shrub or small tree. (Photo from West Greeley Conservation District)

Forestiera has light green leaves that turn yellow in the fall. It produces small, yellow, non-showy flowers in the spring that resemble forsythia, resulting in the female plants producing blue-black berries that form clusters. The berries are actually drupes, which means they are fruits that have a fleshy outer part surrounding a central hard pit that contains the seed; hence the 'olive' in its other common names. The bark is off-white or pale gray, so the branches, which grow in an 'elbow' branching pattern, can add to winter interest.

The New Mexican Privet is very drought tolerant so it is a good choice for Colorado low-water gardens. It grows in sun or part shade, in USDA cold hardiness zones 4-9 and is hardy up to 7500 feet in elevation.

In order for the female shrub to produce fruit, a male shrub must be planted nearby. The berries, along with being showy and attractive, are loved by birds.

Forestiera can be left to grow in its natural shrub shape or it can be trimmed into a multi-stem tree by pruning out lower twigs to be able to display the off-white bark.

The New Mexican Privet is a win-win plant for gardeners and wildlife. For the gardener, it covers many bases. It is fast growing, very drought tolerant and cold hardy. It is also a shrub that performs during all four seasons. Although the yellow flowers are small, they bloom early to late spring when gardeners are longing for hints of green and blossoms, and it flowers before the leaves emerge. Come fall, the leaves glow, turning a bright yellow, which is particularly stunning with the contrast of the dark blue berries. If the gardener chooses to do some trimming, the white bark of the lower branches form a nice contrast to a darker background in the winter months.

The female New Mexican Privet produces blue-black berries that are enjoyed by birds. (Photo from West Greeley Conservation District)

For wildlife, *Forestiera* flowers are a source of nectar for butterflies, bees and other insects. And as they bloom early, they provide nectar for small, early spring butterflies like the hairstreaks. The growth of the New Mexico Privet is relatively dense, providing nesting sites and shelter for birds and other small animals. The blue-black berries produced by the female plants are a good food source for birds.

Another great attribute of tough shrubs like the New Mexico Privet, is that it can grow in various habitats, which makes it a good choice for garden designing and to create diverse wildlife habitats.

No matter what you call it: New Mexican Privet, New Mexico Olive, Elbow Bush, or Texas Forsythia; *Forestiera pubescens* is an excellent choice for any native Colorado landscape.

Member Spotlight

Wild Ones Member Virginia Phillips' Native Landscape to be Featured in the Colorado Springs 2025 Garden Tour

Virginia Phillips has been a member of and actively involved in the Pikes Peak Region of the Wild Ones Front Range Chapter since 2022. She has donated seedlings, helped with plant swaps, presented a webinar on growing native plants in milk jugs, and took the lead on organizing our social events. She also has an amazing native plant garden and has deservingly been selected to be on the Colorado Springs 2025 Garden Tour.

Virginia's property includes more than 200 varieties of native plants, a rain garden, rock piles, birdbaths, rain barrels, microclimates, and a south-facing hillside with full sun, which is critically important for native pollinators. But it didn't start out this way.

As first-time homeowners, she and her husband, James, faced unexpected landscaping challenges due to long-term erosion, invasive plants, and the Colorado Springs Hillside Overlay Ordinance. The Overlay Ordinance is a regulation to help safeguard select hillside parcels in the city. It mandates a fire-wise native wildlife habitat without using structures such as large retaining walls or irrigation systems. They tried conventional landscaping techniques for over a decade, including hiring experts, but had little to show for their efforts and investments, and continued to dread the weed season.

Then, in the fall of 2022, their approach changed. They drafted an ambitious 5-year plan with new goals focusing on managing water, planting deep-rooted regionally native plants, and improving soil health. They are now two and a half years into their Coloradoscaping project, and the transformation is eye-opening. The soil's health, erosion, and water retention have improved, and household water usage has been cut by 50 percent or more.

Visit Virginia's garden during the Colorado Springs 2025 Garden Tour to explore a truly exceptional Coloradoscape!

This year's garden tour is June 28-29 in the Old Farm and Briargate neighborhoods of Colorado Springs, from 9:00 am - 3:00 pm both days.

The event is sponsored by the Friends of Extension (FOX) and raises money for the Colorado State University Extension in El Paso County. Since the tour's inception in 2011, this popular event has been held in various locations around Colorado Springs. They are always seeking home gardens featuring educational benefits to attendees in the areas of water conservation, xeriscaping, deer-resistant techniques, urban homesteading, and native plantings to increase biodiversity.

For more information about the garden tour, go to https://extensionfriends.org.

Volunteer Opportunity

Denver Parks & Recreation 23rd Avenue Native Plant Garden

Volunteering at the Park is getting started again! Help us tackle the weeds at this lovely, mostly native plant park in central Denver. 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. Starting in May 2025 we'll meet weekly for 1 - 2 hours. No need to commit to every week – drop in as your schedule allows! Email us for more information or to get on our list of interested volunteers.

Chapter News

Planting Time is Here! Check out the Events section of the website to locate a Plant Swap Event near you!

There's a simple way you can contribute financially to WOFR, without spending any money! A free donation! Link WOFR (Wild Ones Front Range Chapter) with your King Soopers Card. Their Community Rewards Program will then make a contribution to WOFR at the end of the year, based on the total amount of purchases by the people who have linked their card to our organization. Do it today!

Our next Board Meeting is May 21, from 6-8 pm. If you have any interest in joining our board, consider attending our meeting this month to see how we operate. Email us to get an invitation.

Upcoming Events

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

Boulder County+ Regional Native Plant Swap
May 4

Jeffco Newbie Gardens Crawl
May 10

Douglas/Elbert County Shortgrass Prairie Native Plant Hike
May 14

Northglenn's North Metro Native Plant Giveaway
May 17

WOFR Monthly Board Meeting
May 21

Pikes Peak Region Native Plant Swap
June 1

Jeffco Regional Native Plant Share
June 14

NoCO Native Plant Swap & Giveaway
June 14

Denver Metro Region Plant Swap
June 21

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/
