



WILD
ONES®

Front Range



Bumblebee on Penstemon. Photo by Kristine Johnson.

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Things I Wish I Hadn't Done When Planting My Native Plant Garden

Compiled by Deb Lebow Aal

Recently, I asked a few of our more active members what they wish they had done differently when starting out with their Colorado native plant gardens. And, I got an earful! Here's hoping that this will help you out along your journey to Coloradoscaping your yard.

Mary said what I think we would all say: "wish I hadn't waited so long to get started. And I wish I had dreamed bigger." Dream big, guys!



The fall bronze color of Little Bluestem (Schizachyrium scoparium) stands out when planted in a group.

Vicki said: "I wish I had planted in clusters. No, not chocolate clusters! In the beginning... I was planting single native plants throughout my garden patch, only to discover how lonely many of them looked by themselves. Granted, some do well as a standalone - like *Penstemon*, *Gaillardia*, *Liatris* or even *Yucca*. But there are others that really show well when planted in small groups or clusters. Here are some that I like to plant in clusters: *Linum lewisii*, *Echinacea purpurea*, *Monarda fistulosa*, *Helianthus annuus* or *Achillea millefolium*.

Granted, "*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!*" So, when you shop at your next native plant swap, think about what would look good on its own versus planting in a cluster. Do you get one or three? These days, I am less likely to plant singles, like I did in the beginning, but rather indulge in clusters!

Jen had a lot she would do differently!

- I wish I hadn't taken on too many areas of the landscape at once. We live on a one-third acre corner lot, and once we smothered the front lawn, I began putting in native plants all over the property. Trying to ensure the success of plants across each garden bed became a game of Whack-A-Mole! I would have had better success tackling areas of my landscape in phases.
- I wish I had designed in drifts/groupings. I started with too many single species plantings. As a result, my garden ended up looking disjointed. I am now going back to put in larger drifts of plants, such as *Artemisia frigida*, to give the landscape a more cohesive feel.



Callirhoe involucrata (poppy mallow) is a favorite food for rabbits. Protect your young plants with mesh wastebaskets or chicken wire. (Photo by Linda Hellow)

- I wish I had known to protect new seedlings from animal browsing. In my first year of planting, I discovered rabbits eat *many* species and other animals enjoy pulling new seedlings out and tossing them on the ground. How frustrating to see seedlings “uninstalled” everywhere, with most drying out and dying before I discovered them. I have since learned to plant seedlings with a Dollar Tree wire wastebasket secured on top for protection. Buying a case of them was a worthy investment.



This cheery annual - Plains Coreopsis (*Coreopsis tinctoria*) - is a good option to sow

between young perennials while you wait for them to fill in. (Photo by Cory Maylett)

Sue said she would:

- Plant closer together;
- Sow annuals in the spaces between my plants so that something was growing there while perennials were in their early stages;
- Add more crushed rock into the soil for better drainage; and
- Remove the plants I didn't like sooner.



When ordering grass seed, read labels carefully especially if you're ordering a mix. Or, just order single species seed and mix it yourself. (Photo by Linda Hellow)

Kristine said:

- I wish I had read the fine print on the grass seed mix I used. The mix had smooth brome in it, and I am constantly picking it out. I recommend going with one species of grass at a time, not a mix;
- Solarization with plastic is not a great idea. You can wind up with the plastic breaking down in your garden; and
- I wish I had focused on shrubs and trees first, as they take time to get established. Although I mostly planted natives/regional natives, I do regret planting a few non-native trees and shrubs when we first moved in. And note – buying the younger/smaller trees are better - they are cheaper and do better in the long run than planting a larger shrub or tree.



Don't expect plant labels to last beyond year. Keep detailed notes of your plantings or purchase more permanent plant markers. (Photo by Linda Hellow)

And, finally, me: Deb:

- I wish I had planted the water first – created swales and hillocks to direct water, instead of trying to do that after my plants were established.
- I wish I had labeled my plants better. Invariably, someone will ask me the name of a plant and it is the one that I can't remember in that moment; and
- I wish I had made a distinct area for smaller "specimen" plants that get lost in the bigger picture; an area where I can observe these individual plants. Yes, this is something I can still do!

I hope this helps many of you avoid the mistakes we made! We want everyone to be successful and delight in their beautiful Colorado native plant gardens. Good luck!

Grasses are the Foundation

By Jan Midgley



Colorado native grass Schizachyrium scoparium (Little Bluestem) turns red in the fall. (Photo by Jan Midgley)

In dry lands with few woody plants, grasses are the foundation of the landscape both functionally and aesthetically. But why should we include them in public and private designed landscapes? The small, wind-pollinated flowers are not as showy as the flowers of forbs (flowering herbaceous plants that are not a graminoid -grass, sedge or rush). The visual beauty of grasses lies in their structure, texture and color.

Ecological Function of Grasses

Throughout the year, native grasses provide the same invaluable ecological services in manmade landscapes as in natural areas. They provide food and shelter for birds, insects and wildlife in general. As host plants for lepidoptera (butterflies and moths), grasses sustain insect larvae so essential for baby birds. Grasses have low water requirements after the first year of establishment and stabilize the soil. Grasses contribute to carbon capture, and the deep, extensive root systems aid in soil development. The Western prairies provided rich land to plow for crops because the dance of plants and animals had continued for millennia. Introducing graminoids into soils that have been impacted by agriculture and development helps to rebuild those soils and restore food webs.

Aesthetic Forms

Native grasses evoke a sense of place, recalling the vast prairies that once blanketed the land as far as the eye could see. Planted in drifts, native grasses offer sweeps of color and texture across a landscape. Plant grasses alongside pathways and retaining walls to soften hardscape elements. Grasses add motion to a garden. Fine leaf blades and delicate seeds dance in the slightest breeze. Seed heads sparkle when backlit by morning or evening sunlight. Grasses like Big and Little Bluestem transform in autumn to tawny shades of burgundy.



A grouping of *Bouteloua curtipendula* (Side Oats Grama) makes a display in a prairie garden. (Photo by Linda Hellow)

Grasses can be used as the matrix for a mixed prairie, for borders and as accent plants. The native grasses discussed in this article are perennials. They may be low and turf forming or provide tall vertical elements. Texture choices range from fine to coarse. A grass might serve as a bushy anchor or an airy clump to soften a hard landscape edge. The foliage responds to wind, which adds motion to the landscape.

The small flowers and the prominent stamens display lively colors on close view, but the most lasting color is in the leaves. Colors range from bright to gray greens to blues to reds. Some, like *Schizachyrium scoparium* (Little Bluestem), change color over time. Early in the season, the stem internodes may alternate green and red and eventually the entire clump shines red gold when backlit with Western light.

Locate clumps to allow the low angle of winter light to pass through the seed heads. Morning and, more importantly, late afternoon light highlight the seeds. In the evening, the inflorescence of *Sorghastrum nutans* (Indian Grass) resembles a candle flame. All grasses offer winter beauty.

Snow may crush smaller, delicate blades, but overall the landscape is enhanced by clumps of grass skirted with snow and sparkles of ice. Leave grasses standing through the winter to catch the beauty of frost and snow on the stems and to offer seeds to wildlife.

Water Needs

Native grasses have varying water needs. Grasses that evolved in the short grass prairie have the lowest water needs. Mixed grass prairie species are just that, a mix. Tall grass prairie species need slightly more water. None of them are thirsty garden plants, partially because they have such extensive root systems. The narrow leaves help prevent water loss, and special methods of photosynthesis help regulate water needs.

Grasses have stomata or pores on their leaves through which they let gasses and water enter or leave. The dumbbell shaped cells on each side of the stomata differ from the cell shape alongside pores on forbs. Grasses can open and close their stomata more quickly and thus lose less water during gas exchange.

Cool and Warm Season Native Grasses

Grasses are seasonal, responding to shifts in day length and temperature. Native grasses are separated into two groups called cool season and warm season. The most important difference between these two groups is their time of active growth. Cool season grasses

grow actively in cooler temperatures. They flower and develop seeds before the hotter longer days of summer and fall. Warm season grasses grow actively during the warmest months.



Festuca arizonica (Arizona Fescue) is a regional native that does well in the urban garden. (Photo by Dave Powell, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org)

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[To Read the Rest of the Story.](#)

Announcing the WOFR Podcast!!

We have a new podcast! If you have Apple podcasts, just search for Coloradoscape: The Official Wild Ones Front Range Podcast. You can also access episodes at [Podbean](#).

The podcast is the work of Jonathan Sciarcon, WOFR Board Member. Jonathan's concept is to educate the public about the importance of native plants in the landscape and to give a platform to local and regional experts and practitioners in fields related to native flora and fauna in Colorado and neighboring states. As of this date, Jonathan has interviewed three local experts, and we are sure you will learn a great deal from them.

Plant Profile

Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)



Butterfly weed (Asclepias tuberosa) is hard to miss with its outstanding orange color.
(Photo ©Al Schneider, <http://www.swcoloradowildflowers.com>)

Most gardeners and many lovers of the outdoors are familiar with milkweeds. Showy milkweed, our most common native plant here in Colorado, is tall with clusters of pink flowers. Or perhaps you've noticed the orange flowers of the less common more compact milkweed, the native butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*. Most milkweeds have white sap (the milk in milkweed), and large seed pods that open in the fall to release seeds with white wisps of silk that are swept by the wind.

But often, particularly in recent years, the first thing many nature and garden lovers alike first think of when they hear milkweed is how they support monarch butterflies. Monarchs have the longest migration of any butterfly in North America – up to 3,000 miles; a trip they make twice a year. Monarch populations have declined by as much as 80-90 percent over the past 30-40 years and are at risk for extinction. A huge factor for the decline is habitat loss. Because monarch caterpillars *only* eat milkweed plants, as native gardeners, creating habitat by planting milkweed is a no-brainer.

The relationship between milkweeds and monarch butterflies is fascinating. Milkweed plants have a white toxic sap contained in their tissues (leaves and stems). Even though butterfly weed does not have the white sap, its tissues are also toxic. The sap contains high concentrations of substances that are very toxic to most birds and animals. There are some insects, moths, butterflies and birds that can tolerate the toxicity. But because they don't break down the substances, the monarchs, along with just a few other insects, can also **store** them in their tissues and use its toxicity as a defense mechanism against predators! Cool, right?



The seed pod of butterfly weed (and all milkweeds) contains abundant seeds attached to white, fluffy hairs (pappus) that act like a parachute to carry the seeds on the wind. (Photo by ©Al Schneider, USDA Plant Database)

Ok, now back to more specific information about our Plant of the Month: butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*. Butterfly weed, also called butterfly milkweed, is a bushy, native perennial with beautiful clusters of bright orange flowers that bloom in mid-summer to early fall, and dark green lance shaped leaves. The narrow blue-green seed pods, or follicles, form in late summer and open in the fall to release numerous seeds that are attached to fluffy floss that help with wind dispersal. The species name, *tuberosa*, refers to its thick, tuberous roots. **Here we need to emphasize that we are not talking about butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii*), which we highly discourage you from planting! Butterfly bush is invasive on the East Coast. It may not be so invasive here, but it is aggressive. Significantly, it is not a host plant for the larval caterpillar stage of butterflies, therefore not a good choice for our gardens. It is also not native to Colorado!** (What it does have is a brilliant marketing name.)

Although the fact that the monarch caterpillar feeds exclusively on milkweed plants (butterfly weed included) is reason enough to grow them, there are many other pollinators that feed on them as well. A variety of bees, several species of moth, butterflies, skippers, flies, beetles and hummingbirds feed on the flower nectar and monarch butterflies rely on the nectar for energy for their long migration. Native milkweeds are utilized by birds in several ways. Some, like goldfinches and chickadees use their fluffy seeds for nest building and insulation. The insects that are attracted to flowers are eaten by insect-loving birds. And other insects feed on milkweed seed.



A close-up of a milkweed flower head. Milkweed has an interesting pollination story. See the link in the resources at the end of the article. (Photo ©Al Schneider, <http://www.swcoloradowildflowers.com>)

To Read the Rest of the Story

Member Spotlight

Wild Ones Member Peggy Hanson



We are celebrating the incredible contributions of Peggy Hanson, who is stepping down after 7 years of dedicated service as Treasurer and Board Member of Wild Ones Front Range Chapter. Peggy has been instrumental in the growth and vibrancy of this chapter.

Peggy joined Wild Ones in 2017, an original member of our board. She provided steady leadership through times of growth and change, helping to guide the chapter as it became

the largest and one of the most active in the country.

From hosting meetings and seed cleaning activities at her home to fueling our seed and plant-sharing initiatives; Peggy's generosity, warmth, and passion for learning left a lasting legacy. Her leadership truly embodies the heart of Wild Ones: respect, inclusivity, knowledge-sharing, and action.

Peggy, thank you for your incredibly competent stint as our treasurer, for your dedication to the seed and plant swaps, and your available knowledge on "all things wild" regarding our thriving Wild Ones Front Range Chapter. You made everything better, and people loved working with you and learning from you. Thank you for helping to grow not just our chapter, but a thriving, connecting community. We who know you best know that community is what has driven you. You were so happy to "find your people." And, contrary to what you always said about not being our best spokesperson, you are the best of the best. We love you and will miss you. Your contributions have shaped not only our chapter, but a larger vision of native plants and natural landscapes thriving everywhere.

We will miss her steady hand, wisdom, and warmth, and we wish her well in new endeavors.

Chapter News

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 August 20, 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.

Call for More Volunteers

Our Wild Ones chapter is growing so fast, our small volunteer board can't keep up! With 748 members, we are by far the largest of the 98 chapters across the nation, and while we love having this explosive growth, we need more help and active engagement from more of our members. Here are a few areas we want to highlight:

Seed Swap Lead: We need someone to take the lead for the seed swaps in the fall. Each of our regions will likely hold its own swap. We need someone to serve as the coordinator for the swap activities, from designing the flyers to assisting the regions and managing distribution of the seed inventories, and ensuring that the seeds distributed by Wild Ones are accurately identified. You'll gain expertise in accurately identifying native plant seeds and collecting and preparing them for the swap, and meet like-minded wonderful people! Training will be provided.

Newsletter Lead: Deb has been leading the newsletter work for over 7 years and we would love to find relief for her. This position is responsible for providing (although not always writing) the content of the newsletter every month (or we may go to every other month). We need someone to generate ideas for articles, find writers, tickle those writers when an article is due, edit articles, keep the newsletter schedule up to date, and review the newsletter once it is put together in Constant Contact. Familiarity with Constant Contact is a plus, but training will be provided. You'll contribute to one of the Chapter's

signature information resources and gain visibility with our members. If you like behind the scenes work, this is for you!

Membership Chair: This position sits on the Board of Directors and is responsible for the member recruitment and retention practices, primarily by cultivating the relationships and serving as liaison between members and the Board. This position also promotes member/volunteer engagement and participation and arranges opportunities to attract members and volunteers. The level of activity and commitment can be flexible. It's a great way to meet like-minded plant people.

Grant Writer: We need someone to write a grant guidance document for us for giving out and receiving money. You would be helping the chapter give and receive grants in the future.

Upcoming Events

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

Broomfield Garden Crawl and Brown Bag Social (members only)
July 20

BoCo+ Regional Garden Crawl and Social: Gardening in the Montane Zone (members only)
July 27

WOFR Monthly Board Meeting
August 20

Annual WOFR Chapter-Wide Membership Potluck (members only)
August 23

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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