WILD ONES®
Front Range

BEGINNER'S GUIDE FOR GROWING COLORADO NATIVE PLANTS

WHY THIS GUIDE?

Wild Ones Front Range Chapter has an enormous amount of information in our online toolkit, but we know it can be overwhelming for those new to native plants. This guide is a quick overview for beginners getting started with CO native plants to help set you up for success. Don't be afraid to start small, learn as you go, and jump into Coloradoscaping!

ONLINE TOOLKIT
frontrange.wildones.org/toolkit

Why Native Plants?

If you're picking up this guide, chances are you may know some of the many benefits of landscaping with native plants:

- Native plants create the backbone of our local ecosystems. They feed the insects and pollinators that our birds, mammals and other critters depend upon for food and shelter.
- Native plants are climate resilience powerhouses. They use less water and help soil retain water, and their deep roots store carbon instead of releasing it to the atmosphere.
- Native plants help give us a sense of place, creating gardens that reflect the beauty unique to Colorado's landscapes.
- Native plants are adapted to our harsh growing conditions and are likely to succeed here without extra water, fertilizer or pesticides that exotic imports- we're talking to you, hydrangea- may need to survive.

ASSESSING & PREPARING YOUR SITE

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For native plants, observe more, disturb less. Careful observation guides appropriate site preparation & sets the foundation for success.

Soil: A common myth is that Colorado has "terrible" clay soil. Colorado soils are often low in organic matter & nutrients, but native plants have evolved to thrive in these exact conditions and generally don't require amending. Understand the texture and drainage capacity of your soil with tests you can do yourself:

Find more soil test info & links here:

Compaction: Compacted soil reduces space for air and water, which makes it hard for plants to thrive. To counteract compaction:

- **Topdress** with plant-based compost or leaves, which soil life will break down and incorporate. Repeat with small additions over time.
- **Avoid walking on soil after rain**; wet soil is particularly vulnerable to compaction.
- **Establish pathways** to reduce foot traffic on soil.
- **Use a broadfork or pitchfork to break up soil** rather than mechanical tilling which harms soil life and structure.
- **Use Mulch:** Mulch absorbs pressure from foot traffic, reducing compaction. Organic mulch (leaves, grass clippings, fine wood mulch) improves soil structure as it decomposes, increasing aeration and boosting water retention.

Site assessment: A thorough look at your site conditions and microclimates will reveal planting and design strategies and inform your plant selections.

- **Slope:** Your site's topography will influence how water infiltrates & moves. Build berms or swales to optimize passive irrigation.
- **Aspect:** The direction your planting areas face will help determine how warm/cool/dry/moist they are through the day and seasons.
- **Sun & shadows:** The sun's angle is low in winter, and high in summer. Afternoon sun is hotter and drier than morning sun. Buildings and solid fences cast shadows and block/alter wind.
- **Wind:** Prevailing wind directions change through the year and can impact plant health and use. Plantings can be used to screen or diffuse prevailing winds.
- **Rainfall:** Consider the total precipitation & seasonal patterns of wetness and dryness
- **Consider existing plants, especially trees and shrubs:** Take into consideration what's already there, particularly long-lived plants with roots which should not be disturbed.
- **Downspouts:** How and where does the water drain from structures in your yard? Can you redirect runoff to water plantings?
- **Proximity to open space; fire and flood considerations:** Is temporary protection from wildlife needed? Do you need to consider techniques to harden your landscape against fire or flood risk?

DESIGNING A HABITAT GARDEN

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PLANT FOR A FULL SEASON OF BLOOM
Select plants with staggered bloom times so nectar is available throughout the entire growing season.

PLANT HOST PLANTS
Include critical native host plants that butterflies and other insects rely on to lay eggs and feed their young.

Learn about Host Plants:

PLANT IN CLUSTERS
Plant large groupings of the same species to make it easier for pollinators to find the plants they need.

CONSIDER THE NEEDS OF BIRDS
Plant native shrubs and grasses to provide food, nesting sites, and shelter.

INCLUDE WATER SOURCES
Provide water for birds, butterflies, and bees using birdbaths, shallow bowls, or small puddling areas.

DESIGN WITH ACCESS IN MIND
Incorporate pathways or stepping stones to allow easy access for weeding and plant maintenance.

CONSIDER MICRO-ENVIRONMENTS FOR PLANT PLACEMENT
Use site assessment observations to place plants where they will thrive based on sun exposure, soil, and water needs.

PLAN FOR IRRIGATION
Have a plan in place before planting, whether by hand watering, drip irrigation, or sprinklers.

- Group plants by water needs.
- Do not stop watering trees.

MAXIMIZE PASSIVE IRRIGATION
Direct rainwater from downspouts or runoff from hard surfaces (such as paths or patios) to plants with higher water needs.

How to Approach Designing Your Colorado Native Plant Landscape:

THINK BIG, START SMALL
Once you've developed a design → plan, implement it in phases and begin with a manageable section.

The Difference between Native Plants and Conventional Nursery Plants:

GROWTH PATTERNS
Your new plants will sleep, creep, then leap. Native plants spend their first year growing their most important part: deep strong root systems. They'll begin adding more foliage their second season and typically will be ready to take off and bloom by their third season. This is why native plants often don't have flowers when you see them at the nursery, but be patient as they establish.

EXPECT CHANGE:
While many nursery plants are bred for uniformity and to stay put, native plants survive and thrive by spreading their roots and dispersing seeds where conditions are favorable. This creates a dynamic, constantly evolving landscape. Embracing and guiding the dynamic growth of native plants is a big part of the joy of regenerative landscaping.

TOP 20 BEGINNER-FRIENDLY NATIVE PLANTS

FOR THE FRONT RANGE OF COLORADO REGION

4 GRASSES | 3 GROUNDCOVERS | 8 FORBS | 4 SHRUBS | 1 TREE

FULL SUN | PART SUN | SHADE

ATTRACTS: POLLINATORS | BIRDS | BUTTERFLIES | HUMMINGBIRDS | LARVAL HOST

TOP 20 BEGINNER-FRIENDLY NATIVE PLANTS	SIZE	LIGHT	WATER	BLOOM TIME/ COLOR	*Note: This list is ordered by bloom times, earliest to latest.*
Engelmann's Daisy *Engelmannia peristenia*	To 2' H	☼	Dry	Mar-Jul	Attracts birds, nectar source.
Gambel Oak *Quercus gambelii*	To 25' H	◐	Dry	Mar-May	Multi-trunk tree. Food and cover for birds, mammals, Hairstreak butterfly host.
Prairie Winecups *Callirhoe involucrata*	To 1' H x 3' W	☼-◐	Dry-Med	Mar-Jun	Very colorful, nectar bees, attracts butterflies, larval host. Likes well drained soil.
Prairie / Blue flax *Linum lewisii*	To 2' H	☼	Dry-Med	Mar-Sep	Beautiful prairie flower. Self-seed and may spread.
Creeping Oregon grape *Berberis repens*	1-3' H x	◐-●	Low-Med	Apr-Jul	Tolerates dry shade; 4-season interest; spring blooms for pollinators, berries, evergreen.
Golden Currant *Ribes aureum*	3-10' H	☼-◐	Dry-med	Apr-Jul	Nectar for hummingbirds, butterflies, bees. Tasty berries enjoyed by birds.
Western Serviceberry *Amelanchier alnifolia*	5-15' H x 6-8' W	☼-●	Dry-Med	Apr-Jun	Fragrant white flowers, berries for birds, mammals, butterflies, fall color.
Standing Cypress *Ipomopsis rubra*	2-4' H	☼-◐	Dry	May-Jul	Self-seeds. Hummingbirds love it. Nectar source.
Rocky Mountain Penstemon *Penstemon strictus*	1-3' H	☼-◐	Dry	May-Jun	Easy to grow - will spread.
Leadplant *Amorpha canescens/nana*	To 3'	☼-◐	Dry	Jun-Jul	Nectar insects, fixed nitrogen in soil, very deep roots.
Plains yucca *Yucca glauca*	3-4' H (foliage)	☼	Dry	Jun-Aug	Sword shaped leaves provide texture. Attracts butterflies; yucca moth larval host.
Indian Ricegrass *Achatherum hymenoides*	To 2' H	☼	Dry	Jun-Sep	Birds, butterflies, larval host for skippers.
Sulphur flower buckwheat *Eriogonum umbellatum*	To 1' H x 2'W	☼-◐	Dry	Jun-Sep	Special value to native bees, attracts butterflies, larval host.
Firecracker Penstemon *Penstemon eatonii*	1-3' H	◐	Dry	Jun-Oct	Hummingbirds love it.
Prairie goldenrod *Solidago nemoralis*	1.5-3' H	☼-●	Dry-Med	Jun-Oct	Smaller, less aggressive than other goldenrods. Attracts birds, butterflies, native bees.
Prairie Dropseed Grass *Sporobolus heterolepsis*	To 3' H	☼	Dry	Jun-Sep	Fall/winter interest- leaves turn orange-gold in fall and bronze in winter.
Little Bluestem Grass *Schizachyrium scoparium*	To 3' H	☼-◐	Dry	Jun-Dec	Bluish foliage turns bronze in fall/winter. Attracts birds/butterflies. Skipper larval host.
Blue Grama Grass *Bouteloua gracilis*	To 14" H	☼	Dry-Med	Jul-Oct	CO state grass. Often mixed with buffalo grass for native turf lawn. Skipper larval host.
White Heath Aster *Symphyotrichum ericoides*	To 3' H	☼	Dry	Aug-Oct	Showy white flowers. Special value to native bees.
Aromatic Aster *Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*	To 2'H x 3' W	☼-◐	Dry-Med	Sep-Nov	Late season blooms/nectar source. Special value to native bees.

Find elevation ranges, propagation & growing tips for these plants in our Native Plant Species Sheets:

frontrange.wildones.org/sheets

Where to find these plants:

frontrange.wildones.org/nurseries

TURF REMOVAL METHODS

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Turf-Removal Info & Tips:

Good site preparation is critical for successful plant establishment and minimizing ongoing weeds. Taking the time to prepare your site properly will yield long-term benefits! There are several options for removing existing turf in residential settings in Colorado.

Use chart to choose which one is right for you:

Prioritize these methods over herbicide use. All herbicides, including glyphosate and even organic or homemade products, adversely impact soil biota and human and wildlife health.

More info at: **frontrange.wildones.org/turf**

DON'T STOP WATERING UNTIL YOU'RE READY TO REMOVE TURF & COVER SITE WITH MULCH

Variable	Smothering	Solarizing	Sod Removal
Time	Medium	Slow	Fast
Cost	$$	$$	$$$
Weeds	Won't kill deep-rooted weeds	Won't kill deep-rooted weeds	Won't remove deep-rooted weeds
Tree roots	Safe for tree roots	Safe for tree roots	Not safe in root zone
Sunlight	N/A	Need direct sunlight	N/A
Organic	Yes	Yes	Yes
Labor		Medium	High
Suitable for steep grade?	No - Mulch won't stay in place	Yes	Yes
Additional things to consider:	Not suitable for projects like seeding Remove any tape from reused cardboard boxes. Lay cardboard or contractor paper first, then apply your chosen mulch to a depth of 5 inches immediately.	Concern with dispersal of plastic particles as it breaks down After the solarization process is complete, lay contractor paper and mulch right away.	Need to haul removed sod for disposal or reuse onsite or offsite. Causes considerable disruption to soil biome & removes rich topsoil. Lay contractor paper and mulch as soon as possible after removing the turf. Bare soil is an invitation for neighborhood weed seeds.

SELECTING MULCH FOR NATIVE PLANTS

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SELECTING MULCH

Mulch covers the soil to help prevent water loss and erosion from wind and runoff. Consider using mulch that plants would naturally experience in their native ecosystems. **Do not use rubber pellets/ground tires**, these contribute to microplastics & can heat up in summer. **Skip landscape fabric:** This material lowers the infiltration of water into soil, harms soil life and does not actually block weeds! Instead, consider laying builders paper, or clean corrugated cardboard as a biodegradable temporary weed barrier under your mulch. This will provide additional weed suppression as plants establish.

DON'T STOP WATERING
UNTIL YOU'RE READY TO REMOVE TURF & COVER SITE WITH MULCH

Wood Mulch

Basic chipped wood mulch

Notes: Avoid dyed wood mulches, "gorilla" mulch, and medium and large bark.

PROS
- Free to pick up from municipalities or arborists: see chipdrop.com
- Breaks down slowly; improves soil
- Great for trees and shrubs, & woodland type plantings

CONS
- If applied too thickly, can prevent water from infiltrating into soil
- Avoid bagged products if possible

Leaf Mulch

Topdress with fall leaves

Consider bagging & saving those leaves to use midsummer.

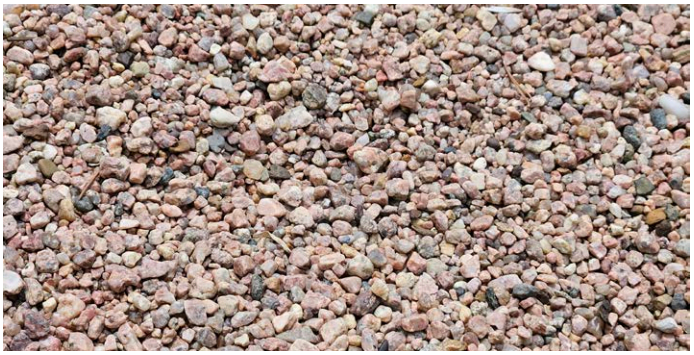
PROS
- Free, breaks down quickly
- Support pollinators & insects
- Improves soil health & water holding capacity

CONS
- In exposed areas, some may blow away (can counter by crushing the leaves)
- Avoid leaves & seeds from weed trees

Avoid Rotting:
Keep all mulch 1" away from perennial crowns & **4-5" away** from shrub and tree trunks.

Pine Needles

Pine needles also make an excellent, free, and sustainable mulch that does not significantly change soil pH, as commonly believed. Not suitable for all plants or for fire-prone areas.



Gravel

- 3/8" chip gravel is ideal
- 3/8" rounded pea gravel or 3/16" "squeegee" also work but will not lock in place as well as chip gravel, which is better for slopes.

PROS
- Promotes good water infiltration, can keep soil temp lower than wood mulch
- Doesn't have to be replenished often
- Can be available free or cheap through reuse options
- Suited for low-water plants from arid ecosystems

CONS
- Mined, often from riparian areas
- Accumulates debris, including weed seeds; has to be raked out seasonally

Living mulch

Plant densely so there is no space between plants.

Consider:
- Native bunch grasses
- Ground cover under taller plants & shrubs

PROS
- Crowds out weeds
- Reduces compaction
- Grasses can be sown as seeds

CONS
- Additional planning if sowing grass seeds
- May need more watering to get established
- May not work with drip irrigation
- If densely planting forbs, more plants are needed so it can cost more

FINDING PLANTS AND HOW TO PLANT

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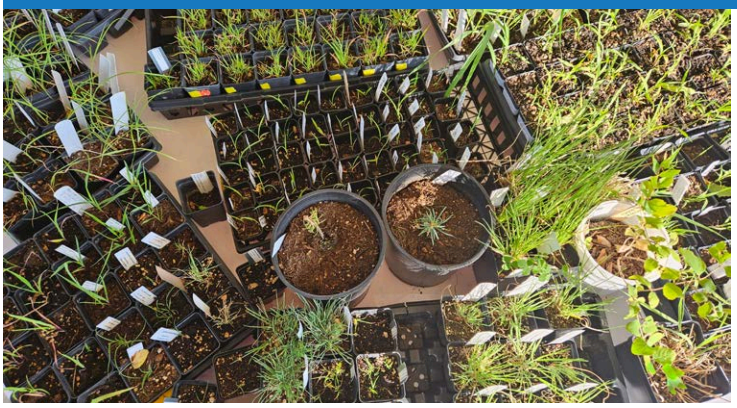


Front Range Wild Ones Native Plant Swap

Ipomopsis rubra (Scarlet Gilia, Texas Plume, Standing Cypress) Seedling

WHERE TO FIND PLANTS

Now that you've selected the plants you want to start with, you'll need to find them in local nurseries or at plant swaps/sales, including **Wild Ones' regional swaps.** While most commercial nurseries typically have limited native plants, there are a couple of rock star nurseries that are reliable sources, including **Harlequin's Gardens** in Boulder and the **High Plains Environmental Center** in Loveland.

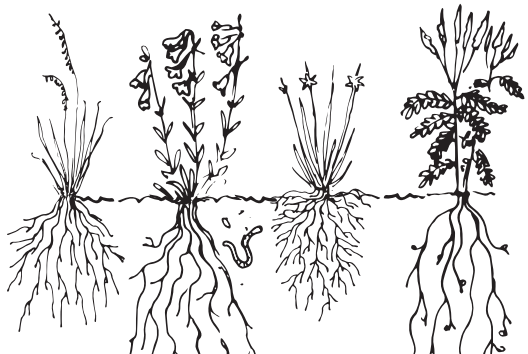
List of Native Plant & Seed Sources:

HOW TO PLANT YOUR NEW NATIVE PLANTS

When it comes to planting for success with native plants, forget everything you thought you knew about how to plant new plants! Instead, do this:

Pick the right plant for the right place. This is the most important thing! Make sure your planting spot has the right sun exposure, soil, water conditions, etc. to enable your newbie to thrive.

Don't amend. Native plants are adapted to our often low-organic clay-heavy soil. If your soil is heavily compacted consider using a broadfork or pitchfork to gently loosen (don't turn!) the soil before planting. Note: There are exceptions, some plants or circumstances may benefit from amending.



Go bare root for forbs. Check your plant for adequate roots. Gently tap your plant out of the pot – can you see roots throughout the soil? If yes, your plant is ready to bare-root plant. Tap the soil around the roots off, or rinse the soil away to expose roots.

Bare-root planting video:

Dig the hole deep enough. When you are planting forbs, the hole can be narrow but should be deep enough to allow the roots to extend down to their full length. Make sure the place where the plant's crown meets the roots is level with the soil level. Planting too deep encourages stem rot, and planting too high exposes roots above the soil and allows them to dry out.

Water in. Put water in the hole before planting, then water again once you've filled the native soil in around the roots to eliminate air pockets. Ensure there is good contact between roots and soil.

Give it TLC while it is establishing. Shield your newbie from sun if planting during the hot months. Water daily for the first few days and then once/week for the first several weeks if the soil feels dry. Then back off the frequency.

Mulch your new plants to conserve moisture and protect soil. Keep mulch 1" away from perennial stems and 4" away from shrub & tree trunks.

Your new plant will sleep, then creep, then leap. Native plants spend their first year growing the important part of their infrastructure – the roots. They'll begin adding more foliage in their second season, and by their third season they are ready to take off and bloom.

COLORADOSCAPE IRRIGATION

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Every site has a different microclimates, so these guidelines may need adjustments. The best way to gauge how much to water your plants is to notice:

Overwatering native plants is more common & damaging than under-watering!

Plant appearance

- leggy and floppy growth indicates overwatering
- yellowing of the lower leaves tends to indicate overwatering
- Leaves turning crispy or brown on the edges can indicate underwatering.

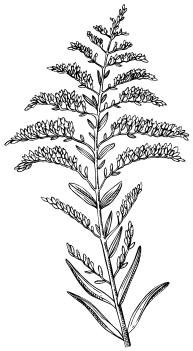
Soil appearance

- soil should be moist when irrigation finishes running to a depth of 4-5 inches.
- if soil has a funky smell, it is not draining adequately for the irrigation timing.

Here are general recommendations for a sprinkler system (opposed to drip):

Season	Frequency	Duration	Notes
Winter (year 1)	Anytime there is no rain or deep snow for 2-8 weeks.	Hand water for a deep soak when upper layer of ground is thawed. Drain & disconnect your hose afterwards so it doesn't freeze!	Deep hand watering a few times during winter year 2-3 is helpful, especially for shrubs and trees.
Spring-Fall (year 1)	2x/week weaning to 1x week by fall. If it's a dry spring, you can increase the irrigation for the first few weeks as plants break dormancy. Then wean to the above schedule.	15- 30 mins	Check that the soil drains sufficiently. If the top layer is soggy but dry a few inches below, split watering into two sessions: half in the morning, half in the evening.
Spring-Fall (year 2)	1x/week Tapering to 1x/every other week	15-30 mins	
Spring-Fall (year 3 on)	1-2x/month	20-30 mins	After year three, CO Native plants never need water more than once per week and can survive with once a month... or less!

- Water early morning or after dusk to reduce evaporation.
- Deep, infrequent watering encourages deeper roots.
- Allow soil to dry between waterings. You can skip watering when it rains.
- More water = more weeds!
- Overwatering leads to weak, leggy growth and potential root rot, especially in wood mulch areas.
- During drought or extreme heat, increased watering (1-4x/month max) or watering for a longer total duration at the same frequency can help prevent stress and prolong blooming. However, don't worry if plants enter dormancy due to drought — native species will rebound the following year.



Water Less with these tips:

GARDENING TO SUSTAIN THE PLANET

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Swallowtail Butterfly on *Echinacea purpurea* (Purple Coneflower)

While Wild Ones focuses on gardening with native plants, there's more to gardening sustainably than making good plant choices. We encourage you to think holistically about how you garden. Here are some tips to guide you to an ecological garden that sustains the earth.

Plant the water first. Slow, sink and spread the water that lands on your garden. Utilize water from downspouts; create swales and berms to direct the water to where you need it.

Build and nurture soil. Leave organic materials, particularly leaves and stems, where they fall; they help retain moisture, break down to improve soil health and plants, and provide critical winter nesting habitat for beneficial insects.

Think beyond pretty to the services your plants will provide. Is it a larval host for a moth or butterfly? Does it sustain native bees or hummingbirds? Does it contribute to soil health? Plants can be pretty AND provide important ecological services. To cover your bases, plant a wide variety of species. The National Wildlife Federation, Audubon Society, and Xerces Society all have excellent lists of plants which provide specific habitat benefits.

Remove non-native turf grass. Non-native turf grass, like Kentucky bluegrass, is thirsty and does little to sustain insects and pollinators. Where turf grass is desired, use native turf like buffalo grass and blue grama, if possible.

Reduce your inputs, especially plastics. Repurpose your own or your neighbor's leaves for mulch instead of buying mulch. Avoid buying and using products bagged in plastic, or those including peat. Find landscape rock that people are giving away for free.

Avoid pesticides. If gardening for the earth, you must avoid pesticides and herbicides. Some, like the neonicotinoids used in most of the nursery industry, are known to cause harm to soil biota, insects, birds, mammals, and humans.

Reduce your outputs, i.e., practice zero waste gardening. Reuse or compost garden waste either onsite or through your city. Save plastic pots for reuse in Wild Ones swaps. Consider forms of Freecycling usable garden material you no longer need. Use plant and tree prunings as mulch.

STEWARDING/MAINTAINING YOUR COLORADOSCAPE

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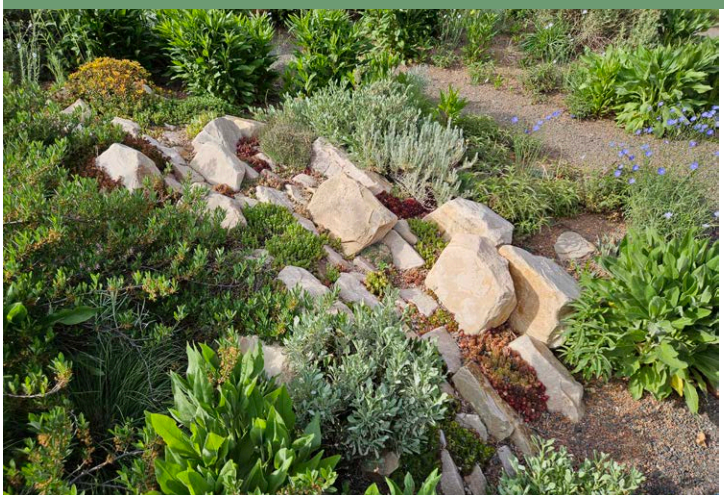

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A NO-MAINTENANCE LANDSCAPE!

You've designed, prepped & planted, so how do you support your landscape now?

Watering: All plants, even the most xeric ones, need attention and water while establishing. Follow the tips on the irrigation panel.

Weeding: Weeds are undesired plants which can crowd out what we want.

Get to know your weeds: What do they look like as seedlings? Are they annuals, biennials, or perennials? How do they spread? This can help prioritize how to deal with them.

When in doubt, leave it. There are many resources for identification. Plant Apps can be helpful but can make mistakes. Also ask other gardeners for help with ID.

The seeds from weeds you have pulled should be thrown away or go through very hot compost which is turned at least 5 times. Do not compost noxious weeds that have gone to seed. Remove weeds before they go to seed or spread by rhizomes — especially during the first two growing seasons.

Mulching: To conserve water & prevent erosion, replenish organic mulch as it decomposes over time. Gravel mulch may need to be raked in late spring or early summer to remove debris.

Pruning/deadheading: Pruning is the removal of living or dead plant material for plant health, aesthetics, or to remove flammable material. Prune woody plants (trees and shrubs) when they are dormant, preferably late winter. Deadheading is the removal of flowers after they have bloomed. This is not necessary, and it can deprive stem-nesting insects of their homes and lessen the food available for birds in your yard. Leave your spent flowerheads and stems for wildlife and for winter interest; they will break down naturally, and new growth will grow through the old.

Cues to care:
Share that you are stewarding a wild and beneficial garden. Communicate this with educational signs, like "Native plant garden in progress" or "We're feeding the pollinators"

Include distinct pathways, purposeful edges and boundaries, ornaments, bright splashes of color, benches in strategic locations, birdbaths and wildlife feeders, defined structures like hedges or crevice gardens; and distinct patterns, such as terracing or large swaths of the same plant.

These visual cues go a long way towards showing that your landscape is intentional and beneficial even if it appears different than gardens people are used to seeing—especially important for people not keyed into what a natural landscape looks like.

SEEK INSPIRATION AND SHARE YOUR LOVE OF COLORADOSCAPES

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Native garden in Denver, in front: Left: *Callirhoe involucrata* (Winecups), middle: *Eriogonum umbellatum* (Sulphur Flower), Middle Bottom: *Oenothera cespitosa* (Tufted Evening Primrose), right: *Opuntia* (Prickly Pear)

Opuntia (Prickly Pear) grow great in pots!

Crevice garden with natives in Denver

Amelanchier (Serviceberry)

Wild Ones Plant Swap

SEEK INSPIRATION AND SHARE YOUR LOVE OF COLORADOSCAPES

Linum lewisii (Blue Flax) in native prairie grasses at Denver Botanic Gardens

Garden with natives on 6th Avenue Parkway in Denver

Monarda fistulosa (Bee Balm)

VISIT DEMO GARDENS

There is nothing like seeing a mature native plant landscape to inspire you and help you envision what you like and where specific native plants are thriving that might do well in your landscape. Fortunately we have a wealth of established gardens that can inspire and feed our senses.

Demo Gardens:

For a more complete listing of these public demo gardens, visit: →

These demo gardens bear mentioning:

- **Laura Smith Porter Plains garden**, **Cottonwood Border & Ponderosa Border at Denver Botanic Gardens** on York Street in Denver
- **Denver Botanic Gardens at Chatfield** in Littleton
- **Rocky Mountain Botanic Gardens** in Lyons
- **Gardens at Spring Creek** in Fort Collins
- **Betty Ford Alpine Gardens** in Vail

Advocacy Tips: Many Coloradans are unaware of the beauty and ecological value of native plant landscapes. As an advocate, you can change this by educating neighbors, HOAs, and community groups about the benefits of "Coloradoscapes". Through conversations, yard signage, and presentations, you can help convert skeptical communities into supporters of sustainable, wildlife-friendly, and water-wise native gardens.

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THE SUNNY BUG FARMETTE

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