



MASTER GARDENER
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

CMG GardenNotes #580-583

Native Plants



Chamaenerion angustifolium, Fireweed
Artwork by Melissa Schreiner © 2023

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CMG GardenNotes #580

Native Plants

References and Review Material

Reading/Reference Materials

CSU GardenNotes

- <https://cmg.extension.colostate.edu/volunteer-information/cmg-gardennotes-class-handouts/>.
- #581, *Native Grasses for Use in Colorado Landscapes*.
- #582, *Native Plants Reference List*.
- #583, *Sources of Colorado Native Plants*.

CSU Extension Fact Sheets

- <https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/>.
- #7.242, *Native Herbaceous Perennials for Colorado Landscapes*.
- #7.421, *Native Trees for Colorado Landscapes*.
- #7.422, *Native Shrubs for Colorado Landscapes*.

Planttalk Colorado™

- <http://planttalk.org>.

Other

- Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Front Range & Foothills, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/FrontRangeSm.pdf>.
- Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Mountains 7,500' and Above, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/MountainsSm.pdf>.
- Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Prairie and Plains, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/PrairieSm.pdf>.
- Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Southeastern Colorado, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/SESm.pdf>.
- Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Western Slope – Below 7,000', <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/WestSlopeSm.pdf>.

Review Questions

1. List five benefits of using native plants in the landscape.
2. Why will native plants never be on the State noxious weed list?
3. Name one reason a straight species may be more beneficial as habitat than a cultivar or a nativar.

4. Why is it hard to find native plants in nurseries/garden centers?
5. All native plants can survive on natural rain and snowfall in your yard. True or False? Explain your answer.



CMG GardenNotes #581

Native Grasses for Use in Colorado Landscapes

Why use native grasses?

- Bunchgrasses can be used ornamentally as specimens or in groups.
- Sod forming grasses can make great low maintenance turf and offer savings in mowing, fertilizing, and irrigation.
- Grasses provide excellent forage and cover for birds and beneficial insects.

Seasons: Cool season grasses green up earlier in the spring and can go dormant and turn brown in the heat. Warm season grasses stay dormant longer in the spring and grow during the warmer season.

Grasses prefer full sun unless stated otherwise in the notes section.

Scientific Name	Common Name	Season	Height	Planting Elevation	Notes
<i>Achnatherum hymenoides</i> (<i>Oryzopsis hymenoides</i>)	Indian rice grass	Cool	12-24"	To 9,000'	Delicate, lacy bunchgrass with attractive showy panicles. Very low water use. Short lived. Edible seeds. Most well-drained soils.
<i>Andropogon gerardii</i>	Big bluestem	Warm	48-72"	To 7,500'	Robust bunchgrass with upright growth. Turns red burgundy in the fall with color retention well into winter. Tolerates most soils (especially clay) and water regimes.
<i>Andropogon saccharoides</i>	Silver beard grass	Warm	24-48"	To 7,500'	Bunchgrass with fine textured leaves and large seed heads which catch the light and persist through the winter. Orange fall color. Grows in all soils, including clay. Low water use.
<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i>	Sideoats grama	Warm	24-36"	To 9,000'	Bunchgrass with small pennant-like seeds on one side of stem. Very low water use. Most well-drained soils.
<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i>	Blue grama, eyelash grass	Warm	6-20"	To 9,500'	Bunchgrass with large, curved flowering spikes that resemble eyelashes. Excellent lawn alternative can be left unmown. Withstands moderate traffic and light shade. Low water use.

Scientific Name	Common Name	Season	Height	Planting Elevation	Notes
<i>Buchloe dactyloides</i>	Buffalo grass	Warm	2-8"	To 6,500'	Sod-forming grass, moderate to low water use. Excellent lawn alternative. Long-lived with a vigorous root system. Prefers clay soils.
<i>Eragrostis trichodes</i>	Sand lovegrass	Warm	24-48"	To 6,500'	Bunchgrass with a lacy, airy inflorescence. Does especially well on sandy soils but tolerates most. Low water use.
<i>Festuca arizonica</i>	Arizona fescue	Cool	10-24"	To 10,000' or higher	Graceful clumping bunchgrass with fine-textured blue-green leaves. Low water use. Tolerates light shade but not traffic.
<i>Koeleria macrantha</i>	June grass	Cool	12-24"	To 11,000'	Bunchgrass with attractive open panicles of flowers. Great mixed with low-growing perennials. Low water use but will tolerate wetter sites. Most soils and light shade.
<i>Pascopyrum smithii</i> (<i>Agropyron smithii</i>)	Western wheatgrass	Cool	12-40"	To 10,500'	Sod-forming grass with upright blue leaves and spikes. Most soils. Because it is strongly rhizomatous, it should be used only where there is adequate growing space.
<i>Panicum virgatum</i>	Switchgrass	Warm	36-48"	To 7,000' (maybe higher)	Slow sod-former with upright growth, vase shaped. Many delicate panicles, high above the foliage in some strains, turn reddish bronze in the autumn. Often used at the back of the perennial border or as a tall screen.
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i> (<i>Andropogon scoparius</i>)	Little bluestem	Warm	12-48"	To 7,500' or higher	Upright growing bunchgrass with green to blue-green leaves and fluffy seed heads that catch the light, persisting through winter. Fall color is a red to bronze, which fades slowly in winter. Sun. Good for clay soils but tolerates most. Low to moderate water use.
<i>Sporobolus airoides</i>	Alkali sacaton	Warm	36-60"	To 7,500'	Striking robust grass with fine textured bluish leaves and a showy, airy, open inflorescence. Low water use tolerates most soils. Easy to establish.
<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>	Indian grass	Warm	36-60"	To 6,500'	One of the most ornamental of the native grasses. Upright growth with large tawny seed heads and golden-orange fall color. Moderate water use. Needs space to grow.

Authors: Irene Shonle, PhD, CSU Extension. Reviewed May 2018 and February 2023 by Irene Shonle, PhD, CSU Extension.

Reviewed February 2023



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- 7.422, *Native Shrubs for Colorado Landscapes*.

PlantTalk Colorado™

- <https://planttalk.colostate.edu/>.

Other

- Colorado Native Plant Society, <https://conps.org/>.
- Colorado Plant Database, <https://coloradoplants.jeffco.us/plantAbout>.
- *Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Front Range & Foothills*, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/FrontRangeSm.pdf>.
- *Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Mountains 7,500' and Above*, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/MountainsSm.pdf>.
- *Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Prairie and Plains*, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/PrairieSm.pdf>.
- *Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Southeastern Colorado*, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/SESm.pdf>.
- *Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Western Slope – Below 7,000'*, <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/WestSlopeSm.pdf>.
- *Flora of Colorado*, Jennifer Ackerfield, 2nd edition. Brit Press. 2022. ISBN: 978-1889878898.
- *A Guide to Rocky Mtn Plants*, 5th edition, Nelson, R. A., and R. Williams. Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2002. ISBN-13: 978-1570984129.
- *Alpine Flower Finder*, Wingate and Yeatts. Johnson Books, 2003.
- *Common Southwestern Native Plants*, third edition, Carter, J.M. Carter, D. Stevens, and J. Boussetot. Colorado Native Plant Society, 2018.
- *Flora of Colorado, Eastern Slope*, 4th edition, Weber, William et al. University Press of Colorado 2012.
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- *Native Plants for High-Elevation Western Gardens*, 2nd edition. Busch, J., and N. Morin. Fulcrum Publishing, 2012.
- *Natural by Design*, Phillips, Judith. Museum of New Mexico Press 1995.
- *Plants for Natural Gardens*, Phillips, Judith. Museum of New Mexico Press 1995.
- *Rocky Mountain Flower Finder*, Wingate J. Nature Study Guild Publishers, 1990
- *Southwestern Native Plants: An Identification Guide*, Carter, J. Common. Mimbres Publishing, 2003
- *Trees and Shrubs of Colorado*, Carter, J., and M. Leggit. Johnson Books 1995.
- *Weeds of the West*, 9th edition. Western Society of Weed Science. 2012. Publication #: WSWS-I. Available free online https://wyoextension.org/publications/Search_Details.php?pubid=696.



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Sources of Colorado Native Plants

Note: Information is subject to change at any time. No endorsement is intended of products mentioned, nor is criticism implied of products not mentioned. This is simply a guide to get you started.

Colorado Native Plant Society, also known as CONPS, keeps an updated list of retail vendors for seed, container grown, and bareroot sources. Please visit their website at <https://conps.org/home-2/resources/gardening-with-native-plants/>. Click on the tab “Where to Buy Native Plants.”

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Reviewed March 2023