

NATURE

Create your own Colorado garden that gives more

By Lindsay Squires

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As I walked a winding trail in Douglas County Open Space recently, natural treasures spilled along the dusty path. Yellow sulphur flower bloomed in the shortgrass prairie like gold. Wild geranium, penstemon and locoweed sparkled across the meadowland in flashes of purple and fuchsia. Native insects, honey bees and butterflies industriously worked the summer wildflowers.

Stopping every few feet to study these spectacular plants, I felt that I was discovering a secret in plain sight. What if more of the plants we chose for our own gardens were ones that flourish in the Colorado lands we love? Would our landscapes become more alive? Would we?

The daily rush that drives us is often the pace we bring to the garden, but nature invites us to a different process. Inspired by these hardy native plants growing wild and free in their natural North American landscape, I set out to learn more about blooming where you're planted — and planting what will bloom.

Exploring a hidden gem.

My exploration began at the Hidden Mesa Open Space native garden, a wonderful collaboration between Douglas County Open Space and the Colorado State University/Douglas County Extension Department. Connie Huffaker is one of several master gardener volunteers working to develop the native pollinator habitat there.

"Everyone makes terrible mistakes their first year planting in Colorado," laughed Huffaker, now in her sixth year. "Most people have the same experience. It's all about the soil and climate here."



"This is the plant I love that brought me to natives," Huffaker said, admiring the Silvery Leadplant (*Amorpha canescens*) with its upright ferny leaves and slender purple blossoms.

Arranged with Blonde Ambition (*Bouteloua gracilis*) and Pineleaf Penstemon (*Penstemon pinifolius*), Huffaker noted that grouping plants by watering needs is crucial to success. With many native perennials needing three years to reach their mature size, it's about water, soil, sun and patience.

We visited the Desert Four O'Clock (*Mirabilis multiflora*), a sturdy greensilver plant with pink flowers, happily surviving and reseeding in a tough western exposure near a busy stand of Goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*).

At the Desert Prince's Plume (*Stanleya pinnata*), Huffaker said it was Hidden Mesa's favorite find for the year, its bright yellow flowers visible from the road. Planted nearby was Mojave Sage (*Salvia pachyphylla*),

intended to repel rabbits from the purple Kobold Gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*) just beginning to bloom.

Every plant in the garden offered unique value to native pollinators, insects and birds. The garden is even designated a Monarch Waystation, with a first monarch sighting last year. With such vital interdependence at work in Colorado's many ecosystems, Huffaker and I agreed that taking more hikes and seeing nature in its real state is a wonderful way to learn more.

Rewilding the backyard.

Hiking is one of the ways my friend, Pam Schulz, discovered her love for native plants.

"As a volunteer for Douglas County Open Space, I led geology hikes and was frequently asked the names of wildflowers seen. After some point, I was motivated to learn their names and participated in the CSU Extension native plant classes," Schulz said.

While exploring Colorado trails, Schultz works on photographing and identifying native plants in their natural habitat. "Now, I'm focused on a timeline of blooms ... to guide me in my own native plant garden."

Chocolate flower, fringed sage, cut-leaf coneflower, penstemon, rudbeckia, yellow sundrops, winecups, rabbitbrush, prickly poppy and prairie sunflower festooned her backyard. Some plants came from the garden center; others, Schultz planted from seed.

As we sipped coffee and watched a fritillary butterfly alight on a coneflower, I was moved by how plants connect us to nature — and to each other. My friend has an experienced eye on the trail yet shares her garden as a learner.

"This is a unique setting, and I always felt it had potential," she said, gesturing to little pocket gardens and native cacti among the rocks. Schulz works with several different microclimates and native soils within her backyard.

"I think that many feel the need to have 'supershowy' plants, and that often equates to water-intensive plants, which is not practical in our semi-arid ecosystem. Perhaps we need to retrain our eyes to better appreciate our native prairie and foothills wildflowers and grasses.

This is Colorado!" Schulz smiled.

Creating natural value.

Ross Shrigley, executive director of Plant Select®, agrees that Colorado-style gardening means shifting the way we use water in our landscapes and celebrating a style that actually works.

Saving water, increasing property value, supporting pollinators and fostering biodiversity are just a few of the things we can accomplish by planting what thrives in this environment.

Shrigley recognizes that native plants can be a hard sell at garden centers, but his advice is practical: “It’s not going to look great in a nursery pot, but get it in the ground.” Once you see a monarch visiting that Blazing Star Meadow Gayfeather (*Liatris ligulistylis*), you’ll be ready to plant more.

“People should play and dabble with garden/landscape colors, texture and sustainability with these plants. The creative process is what should be enjoyed, fostered and allowed to flourish in every new gardener,” Shrigley said.

Start with just one plant.

Plant by plant, we can nurture native wildness and wonder in whatever bit of land might be ours.

Deb Lebow Aal of Front Range Wild Ones deeply values the time she spends in her garden and finds the hard work rewarding.

Beautifully, she believes that no garden is ever finished.

“People don’t (realize) what they can do with their piece of property and how important it is to the ecosystem,” Lebow Aal said. “Start small. Have patience. Take half an existing flowerbed and just plant a few species.”

Dr. Jennifer Boussetot of Colorado State University and the Colorado Native Plant Society celebrates the creative possibilities of native gardening.

“I love to point out to people that you can have whatever garden style you want but can just substitute in native plants. It’s like art. It’s simply the medium you use,” she said. “You just have to start — with one plant.”

Creating conditions to flourish

This summer, I’ve been building a new garden of perennials and shrubs.

Planting late at night with a headlamp and watering in the early morning in my robe, I show my neighbors that working with nature is a process.

I’m not doing everything right in my little garden, but I’ve noticed nature coming closer. Plant Select® Red Birds in a Tree thrives despite neglect, drawing in daily hummingbirds. Finches forage the seeds of spent salvia

heads. Kannah Creek® Buckwheat spreads beneath the hot sun. Sunflowers are awirl with honey bees.

Where might you begin?

Right where you are. Try curiosity. Recover a sense of wonder. Make peace with a few weeds. Dig your hands into the soil. Turn your face toward the sun.

Plant one native plant, then another.

Learn more at your local independent garden center. Find amazing resources, demo gardens, and generous people through Front Range Wild Ones, Colorado Native Plant Society, Plant Select®, and Colorado State University Extension.

If you're worried about getting it "right" the first time, welcome to a community of friends who are learning and discovering, even from getting it wrong. Together, we find ourselves happier when we take time to learn from the resilient plants around us, the remarkable people near us, and the actual place we call home.

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