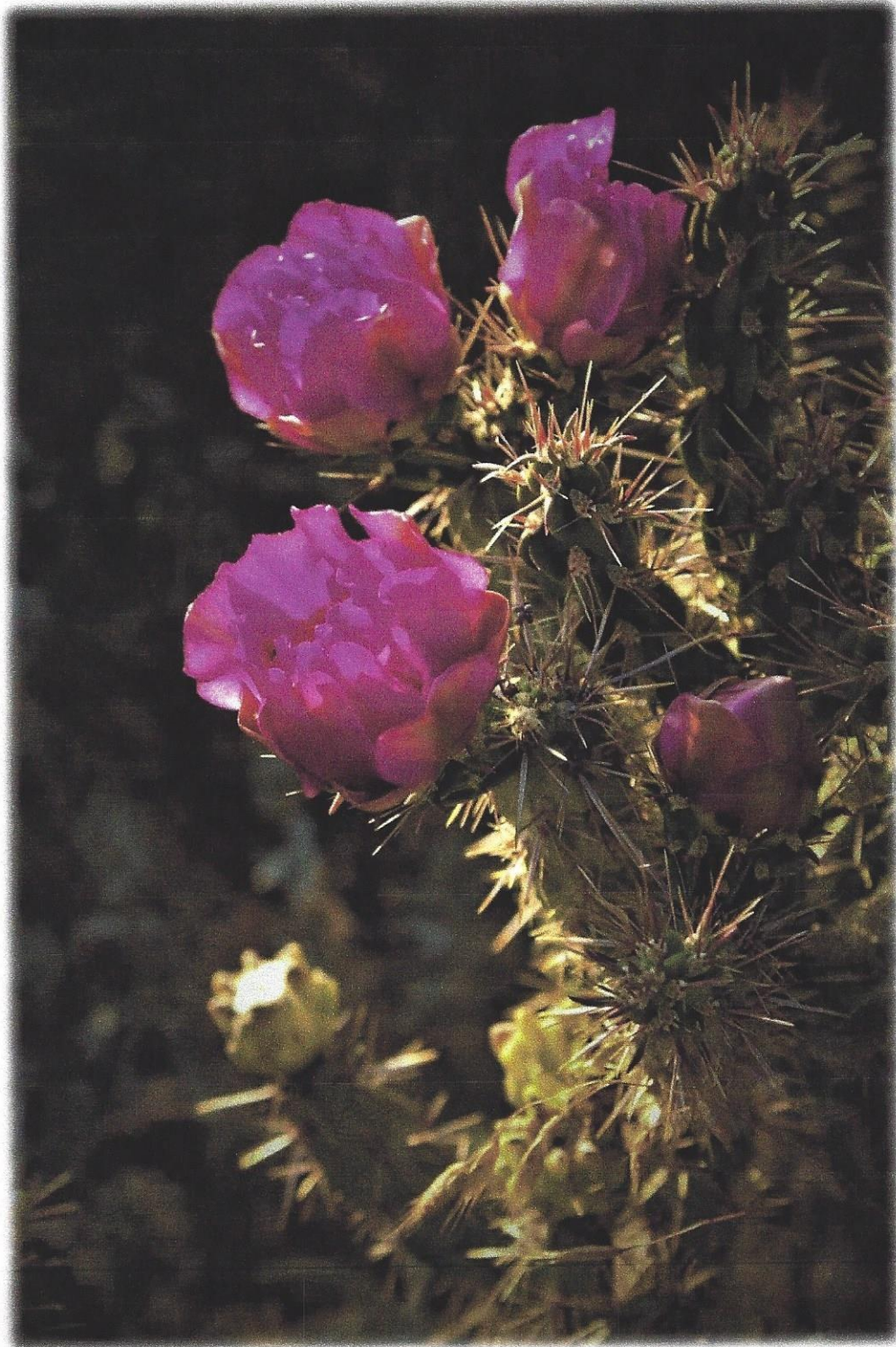


Aquilegia

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Native Plants Take Root in Colorado Residential Landscapes

By Connie Clem

"This is Colorado. Let's garden that way!"

If only it could be that easy to get people's attention.

Population growth is accelerating in many parts of our state, and just as the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, now is our best chance to inspire the nature-based residential landscapes of tomorrow. Colorado seems to be at an especially pivotal point these days, with new subdivisions rising while our local climates are getting warmer and weirder. It is more important than ever to grow wisely.

Many of us "get" the reasons why gardening native is resource-smart, and how well-chosen natives in the home landscape can connect us meaningfully with our unique Colorado terroir. And we hope that this viewpoint is taking hold outside the botanist bubble. The good news is, we can see a well-rooted series of campaigns in government, in the nonprofit space, and in green industry.

State Government

Native plants gained some visibility when Governor John Hickenlooper proclaimed June 10–16, 2016 as Native Plant Week, setting a precedent for celebrations in later years. Colorado's Water Plan, launched in 2015, also furthers the use of native and xeric plants. Applications for CPW grants are due August 1, 2018, and February 1, 2019 (see link at the end of this article). The Colorado Revised Statutes include five mentions of the term "native plant," such as CRS 39-22-4401, a tax code provision allowing for voluntary donations to the Colorado for Healthy Landscapes fund. This is a checkbox on the Colorado State Income Tax Return.

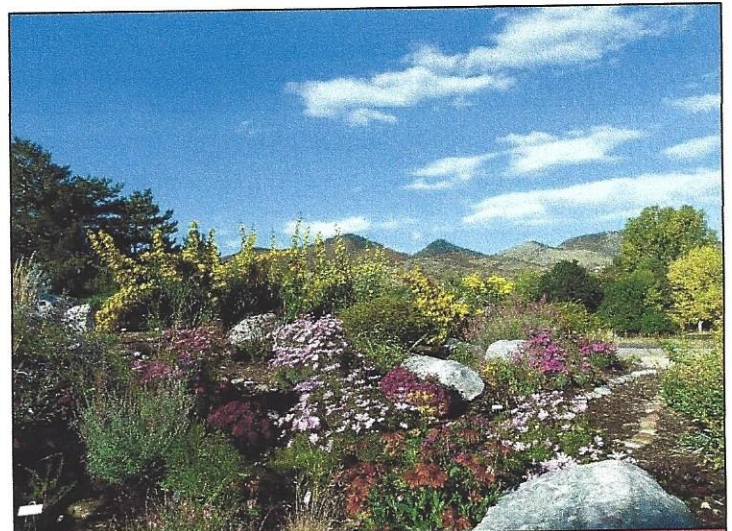
The CSU-sponsored Native Plant Master Program® is enjoying a strong educational reach in most of its 12 participating counties. New NPMs in 2017 contributed more than 3,000 hours of outreach time to share what they have learned with others. They and CSU Extension staff reached about 16,000 Colorado residents last year. The program also improved more than 33,000 acres via sustainable landscaping or alien invasive weed control in 2017 alone.

Community: Growing Interest in Native Plant Gardens

Any article on native plant education is remiss if it does not mention the Denver Botanic Gardens. DBG has added repeat offerings of its popular classes on native plants to meet increased demand. It aims to educate and inspire gardeners to help people realize they do not need to sacrifice ornamental beauty when they use natives, and that there is more to the prairie than grasses. More and more homeowners are replacing bluegrass turf with native and water-wise plantings. Plant Select® choices are among the earliest to sell out at DBG's spring plant sale.

Audubon Rockies, with its Habitat Hero program, is another ally of native plants. AR collaborates with CoNPS by co-hosting annual garden tours, offering workshops, cross-pollinating events, and exchanging articles to reach each other's readership and audience on the social media.

Jamie Weiss, Habitat Hero coordinator, says that collaboration and partnerships are its best tools for promoting the benefits of cultivating native plants. When organizations collaborate on native plant promotion, each organization "has its own lens." Each group reaches a different demographic and contributes its unique expertise. Plus, each has a community of volunteers to mobilize for projects such as HH's five demonstration gardens. In 2016 and 2017, Habitat Hero volunteers installed more than 60,000 plants and improved almost 300 acres. Nearly 7,000 participants attended their workshops. The Visitor Center Garden in Loveland, planted with help from volunteers, has garnered 20,000 visits in a single year. And to date more than 250 gardens have been awarded Habitat Hero designation. ►



This Colorado Springs yard was recognized by Habitat Heroes in 2014 as an enjoyable place for wildlife, and people alike. © Audubon Rockies

◀ CoNPS also is reaching more area gardeners. Orders for the spring plant sale more than doubled in each of the last two years. Two-thirds of the registrants for the spring 2018 conference on landscaping with native plants were in the homeowner segment and the other third in the green industry. Each year, the conference has moved to a larger venue to accommodate growing interest, and seats have sold out. The next conference in the series will be at Denver's Auraria campus with a capacity of 500 registrants on February 16, 2019.

CoNPS has awarded mission grants for reaching the gardeners of today and tomorrow. One grant went to the Colorado Foundation for Agriculture, for distributing a Colorado Reader publication about native plants for 1,500 Colorado schools, and a second grant to launch a Legend High School club for native plants and environmental issues in Parker.

CoNPS also is inviting Colorado residents to contribute to an important long-term project to monitor the performance of native plants used in residential landscaping. See <https://conps.org/gardening-with-native-plants/> to get started.

Industry: Native Plant Awareness Penetrates the Colorado Garden Marketplace

Green industry organizations also are leading the way for their members and consumers. The Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado has had a long-time focus on sustainability and water-wise landscapes. Its June 22 Tip of the Week email focused on why it's "cool" to go native, concluding "When we add more natives in our yards, we're being Colorado-friendly, have less maintenance to do—and we save water." ALCC had a spot on native plants on Denver's 9news channel on Saturday, June 23, that can be viewed on the 9news website.

Landscaping-focused studies conducted by the real estate website Houzz showed that homeowners have objectives that native plants clearly can meet. One study found that 16 percent of survey respondents nationally were concerned with the challenges of drought/water shortage, and 18 percent wanted solutions for excessive sun. In the arid west, those numbers can only be higher.

In another study, Houzz reported that:

- 76 percent of respondents preferred low maintenance landscape plants;
- 69 percent wanted flowering plants;
- 52 percent wanted insect- or bird-attracting plants;

- 51 percent wanted native plants specifically;
- 45 percent wanted drought-resistant plants;
- 34 percent wanted edible plants; and
- 30 percent wanted cold-resistant plants.

Of course, natives can answer each of these needs.

Jesse Eastman, owner of the Fort Collins Nursery, agreed that his company's expertise on native plants is an asset.

Says Eastman, "Native plants are still a fairly niche market, so having expertise in this area is a great way for us to stand out. It is often our most educated and well-informed clients who are the most passionate about including native plants in their landscapes, and being able to serve them well means they tell other people about us too!"

He also affirmed that more customers are discovering the benefit of native flowers as a food source for pollinators, leading to an

uptick in sales of native plants. Reduced water usage and habitat creation are other top goals of his customers.

Eastman adds, "We have a section of our nursery that is dedicated exclusively to native plants, and just by separating them it raises questions and creates opportunities to educate customers. We also have classes and workshops that touch on native plants, low-water landscaping, and landscaping for wildlife habitat. More classes would be great, but time and space are limited."

Of course, there is more educating to be done and there are more ideas to be found or hatched. It never hurts to apply a little more leverage to hasten the paradigm shift.

Home owner associations (HOAs) can be an effective leverage point. In June 2018, Plant Select® gave its first HOA Partner Award to Denver's Cherry Creek 3 neighborhood. Cherry Creek 3 also received a bronze award in 2016 in the Colorado Environmental Leadership Program. HOA interest is still gathering steam in Colorado, but HOAs elsewhere, such as in Austin, Texas, have required the use of native plants for many years.

A recent post from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center talks about how to "Sway Your HOA." Presentations that link water use and cost savings can provide an additional "aha" moment. For example, the Cherry Creek 3 project is on record as saving 15 million gallons of water and \$100,000—no small change.

"When we add more natives in our yards, we're being Colorado-friendly"



Echinacea purpurea and insect. © Connie Clem



Growing It Forward

For water usage and pollinator habitat, adapted plants are an acceptable choice, but native plants are best for the native bees and butterflies in Colorado. Insects may be more charismatic than plants to some people, but “We’ll take the interest any way we can get it,” says Deryn Davidson of the CSU Extension Office in Boulder County.

To grow more interest, any of us with some free time can partner with a local library, community center, or kids’ summer program and share what we know. Organizations need programming, and the plants need your advocacy. Show participants that it is not that hard to find the right plants, once you know what you are looking for. Many natives can survive and thrive under a variety of conditions and therefore make good ambassadors and confidence-builders. We can share seedlings, or grow extras, for sale or giving at annual neighborhood swaps and sales.

One of the challenges in raising demand for native plants is the ability to meet that demand. One perhaps less expected solution is under way in Oregon, where the state is employing prison inmates in the

propagation of native plants for restoration. Talk about making a difference.

Lady Bird Johnson put it this way: “Wherever I go in America, I like it when the land speaks its own language in its own regional accent.” Three cheers for more use of Colorado natives for all they give us.

Connie Clem writes on public policy issues, inside and outside. She’s making her corner of Niwot native again. Connie can be reached at connie@cleminfostrategies.com or (303) 242-6278.

Helpful resources:

<http://www.coloradowaterplan.com/> ; see also <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cowaterplan/integrating-water-land-use-planning> and <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cowaterplan/colorados-water-plan-grant-fund>

CRS 39-22-4401, Legislative declaration in the tax code allowing for voluntary donations to the Colorado for Healthy Landscapes fund, <http://bit.ly/2IJRJSj>

CSU Extension Native Plant Master Program information, <https://spark.adobe.com/page/Y7O3IVwc1Q070/> and Impact report, <http://extension.colostate.edu/docs/comm/impact/npm-2017.pdf>

<https://www.botanicgardens.org/education/adult-programs/rocky-mountain-gardening>

<http://plantselect.org/>

<http://rockies.audubon.org/habitat-heroes> and <http://rockies.audubon.org/programs/habitat-hero-education>

CoNPS monitoring project, <https://conps.org/gardening-with-native-plants/>

ALCC Tip of the Week, June 22, 2018,

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1101178492165&ca=6d842550-4d56-4eec-a2a5-3ccb406d4b0d>

“Experts suggest native plants for your garden and yard,” ALCC presenter, originally aired June 23, 2018, (00:3:12 video) <https://www.9news.com/video/life/home-garden/experts-suggest-native-plants-for-your-garden-and-yard/73-8169362>

http://www.alcc.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=720:hidden-value-of-landscapes&catid=24:sustainability

http://www.cherrycreek3.com/Awards___Honors.html

“Sway Your HOA,” Pam Penick, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Feb 28, 2018,

<https://www.wildflower.org/magazine/landscapes/sway-your-hoa>

Considering Native Plants for Your Association, <http://www.hoamanagement.com/considering-native-plants-for-your-association/>

<https://www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/native-plants.php>

CSU PDFs on native plant topics, <http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/natural-resources/?target=publications#native>

Houzz studies,

<https://www.houzz.com/ideabooks/83071112/list/data-watch-how-people-upgrade-their-yards-and-what-they-spend>

Oregon Department of Corrections Sustainability Plan 2017-2022 (Five Year Plan), <https://lnkd.in/gCCqxTj>

Conservation Projects in Prison: The Case for Engaging Incarcerated Populations. (2015) T.N. Kaye, K. Bush, C. Naugle and C.J. LeRoy. *Conservation and Science. Natural Areas Journal*, 35:90-97