



# MASTER GARDENER

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION

## Year Round Gardening

### **Going Native! Converting Turf to Native Plants**

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Maybe it's the cost of water, or the mowing, or a desire to provide better habitat for native pollinators. Whatever the reason, you want to eliminate some of your lawn and replace it with a native plant garden, or just mulch.

First you need to kill and remove your turf. There are several ways to kill a lawn. You might ask why can't I just turn the water off and let the lawn die on its own? Well you can, but you probably won't like the results. Even if your lawn is pristine bluegrass, with nary a weed, what you will likely get is not a blank slate, but a dry weedy patch where only the crab grass, dandelions, and thistles survive. And thrive they will, with no competition. Native vegetation is unlikely to be able to compete with these weeds.

You can use a broad spectrum weed killer such as glyphosate, that will be the fastest method. An alternative is to turn off the water and solarize the lawn by covering it with black plastic for about 2 months starting in spring. That method has an advantage over herbicides of heating the soil to a point where most weed seed will be killed. A more aesthetically pleasing alternative is to cover the area in newspaper, at least 10 pages thick, and cover the newspaper with 2" of wood mulch. Wet it down (to prevent blowing) and leave it in place for several weeks or even until the following spring. As the newspaper breaks down it will provide additional organic matter to the soil.

Once the turf is dead, you need to decide whether or not to remove the root and thatch layer. If you are just going to mulch the area you can leave it in place. If you do leave it in place, mow and rake it so the layer is as thin as possible. On a steep slope the root systems may help prevent erosion.

If the plan is to start native vegetation from seed or plants you should expose bare soil. The roots and thatch of the dead turf can be removed by rototilling and raking. In smaller areas you can just dig up the dead turf. Once the turf is removed, amend the soil, then plant either by seed or plants.

Plant selection is the next step. The major criterion is the amount of sun available. If your garden receives less than 6 hours of direct sun a day, you may have to look for a shade tolerant pallet of plants.

Dry shade is the most challenging environment for gardeners but you can find some appropriate plants for that environment among native plants. For really shady environments (less than 4 hours of direct sun) consider shrubby plants and ground covers such as Oregon grape holly (*Mahonia repens*), or kinnikinnik (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*). These plants thrive as undergrowth in forested mountains.

Sunnier environments will allow you to choose from the wide array of prairie plants, and dryland desert plants. Prairie flora includes native grasses and flowering plants that with the right conditions will thrive on little water and lots of sun. Grasses include blue gramma grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*), with it's characteristic 'eyelash seedpods', or big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*). These native grasses can be started from seed or plants. Most of these native grasses are warm season grasses. That means they will green up much later than your fescue or bluegrass lawn.

Prairie plantings also feature a wide variety of flowering plants. Black eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), Rocky Mountain penstemon (*Penstemon strictus*) and prairie zinnias (*Zinnia grandiflora*) are just a few of a very large group of native flowering plants.



While prairie plants can be started from seeds, I do not recommend native plant seed mixtures. These mixes can contain weedy plants that you may not realize are too aggressive, until they have taken over your seedbed. It can be difficult to sort out what is coming up when there are multiple species emerging simultaneously. I prefer to purchase seed for each variety, and then sow in drifts. It is easy to identify what is emerging in each drift and weed out the interlopers. An alternative if the budget allows, is to buy plants, and establish your natives more quickly.

Dryland desert plants are good for very hot and sunny areas. Many of these are succulents or cactus plants. Soils must drain well to support this plant life. Prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia macrorhiza*) and plains yucca (*Yucca glauca*) are two examples that might work well in the Pikes Peak region.

During the first couple of seasons you will have to water all of these plantings in order to establish the garden. Once established these plants will thrive with very little supplemental irrigation. Fertilization needs tend to be lower for these plants than for non-natives. It may make sense to apply a bit of mulch between plants during the establishment phase to minimize evaporation and suppress weeds.

For more details check out the Colorado State University Publications:

Xeriscaping Retrofit Your Yard – 7.234

<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/xeriscaping-retrofit-your-yard-7.234/>

Low-Water Native Plants for Colorado Gardens: Front range & Foothills

<https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/native/FrontRange.pdf>

Choosing a Soil Amendment – 7.235

<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/choosing-a-soil-amendment/>

*Colorado Master Gardeners are available to answer your questions at the extension office help desk located at 17 N Spruce Street, Colorado Springs. The desk is staffed on Mondays and Wednesdays, from 9am to noon and 1pm to 4pm. Help desk volunteers can also be reached by phone at 719-520-7684, or at [csumg2@elpasoco.com](mailto:csumg2@elpasoco.com). Get answers to your horticulture questions by visiting [ask.extension.org](http://ask.extension.org) any time day or night. Follow the El Paso County Master Gardeners on [www.facebook.com/ColoradoMasterGardeners.EPC/](http://www.facebook.com/ColoradoMasterGardeners.EPC/).*