**DRAFT: April 27, 2021**

**Colorado Native Landscaping Coalition**

**Recommended Native Landscaping Policies**

**for Colorado Local Governments and Water Providers**

Colorado should transform Colorado landscaping by emphasizing native plants. Decades of research and real-world experiences in native landscaping have demonstrated that this change is feasible on a wide scale and has the ability to solve many environmental problems. The Colorado Native Landscaping Coalition ([Wild Ones, Front Range Chapter](https://frontrangewildones.org/), the [Audubon Rockies Habitat Hero Program](https://rockies.audubon.org/habitat-hero), the [Colorado Native Plant Society](https://conps.org/), the [Colorado Wildlife Federation](https://www.coloradowildlife.org/garden-habitat-certification/), and the [People and Pollinators Action Network](https://peopleandpollinators.org/)) joins with others in affirming that this transformation is both urgent and possible. It is time to adopt policies that will lead to that transformation.

It is not a deep mystery that plants native to Colorado tend to thrive in Colorado. Native plants are often hardier in our soils and climate than introduced species. They often require less irrigation, which means both water resource preservation and major cost savings. Native plants usually need fewer soil amendments, as well as less fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides. Cost savings over time will benefit the bottom line.

While native landscaping can be beautiful and less expensive than conventional landscaping, our Coalition goals are about more than pretty landscaping and are distinct from “xeriscaping” implemented primarily to promote low water use. In an arid state like Colorado, water use must be efficient, but landscape design has to achieve much more than the single goal of low water use.

Our Colorado urban and suburban ecosystems need native plants to support pollinators and wildlife. The vast majority of insect species are host plant specialists, meaning they can only forage on plants with which they have co-evolved. These insects are the primary pollinators of most plant species and the foundation of the diet of most birds and other animals. Without native plants, and the insects that pollinate and eat them, our local ecosystems collapse. We mustn’t allow that loss to be added to other biodiversity and habitat losses in Colorado.

The good news is that neighborhoods and properties of all sizes (both private and public) hold the potential to solve the global biodiversity crisis. By creating a set of interlinked native plant landscapes, each patch of habitat becomes part of a collective effort to sustain the living landscape for birds and other animals and also part of a collective solution to our water supply and climate crisis. Increasing the percentage of native plants in residential yards, in commercial spaces, and in parks and municipal open space~~s~~ can become the foundation of healthy and diverse ecosystems.

Native plants are also part of the solution to the climate crisis. Native landscapes have healthy, biodiverse, resilient soils which efficiently absorbs carbon from the atmosphere, thereby reducing carbon footprints. Resilient landscapes can counter the impacts of climate change. Healthy soils buffer us during times of drought and counteract the heat island effect in urban areas.

The biodiversity, water supply, and climate crises that native landscaping can help address will not be overcome solely by individual lawn makeovers and demonstration gardens. That indispensable pioneer work of showing the feasibility of native landscaping has been accomplished. Local yards and landscapes, taken as a whole, can be the foundation of healthy and diverse ecosystems.

Native landscapes also reflect the inherent beauty of Colorado and honor the cultures and land management practices of the indigenous peoples who tended this land for millennia. A connection with nature is critical to our physiological and psychological well-being, especially for children. However, “nature” does not have to be “out there,” officially designated, purchased, driven (or walked) to, or merely a destination for school field trips. Native landscaping and non-toxic land management practices in urban and suburban areas benefits all communities, not only people with the ability to visit specially designated parks or trails. Nature is not somewhere else. It is where we spend our daily lives.

Enormous opportunities exist across all of Colorado. More native habitat (yards planted with native trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses, connected by conservation corridors adjacent to sidewalks, bike paths and roadways) can form the foundation of healthy and diverse ecosystems, and invite wildlife into our urban and suburban spaces. We don’t mean that every yard and ballfield must become native landscapes.

However, every yard, office park, recreation site, and open space presents an opportunity to bring an authentic Colorado nature experience directly to all of us. No property is too small to support biodiversity and build valuable habitat corridors. Butterflies and bees and birds move, from yard to yard, and from street to street. What a bird needs in April might be found in one yard but in May a different essential resource could be available in native landscaping down the street. In combination, local native landscapes could all add up to a gigantic, diverse, and resilient regional “park.”

The region’s rapid population growth creates opportunities with every new development and existing developments also stand in need of transformation to biologically diverse, regionally appropriate, climate-resilient, beautiful, and welcoming native landscapes.

Local governments and water providers have many tools and resources available to help achieve this landscaping transformation. They can be grouped into six issue areas, each with specific action steps.

1. **Focus on Communities**

Communities know their needs best and are in different places regarding progress already made in native landscaping, local environmental conditions, and the most effective paths toward making changes. Community input and decision-making will reflect a community’s needs, unique circumstances, and local challenges. That can lead to community-led wide-scale transformation in neighborhoods, in streetscapes, in public facilities, and open spaces.

Specific Actions

1. Consider establishing a local Citizen Advisory Committee to develop strategies to promote native landscaping. Members of the five statewide organizations in the Colorado Native Landscaping Coalition might be appropriate for such local Advisory Committees, as they reside around the entire state.
2. Engage local residents, schools, and community groups to support native landscaping projects through volunteer opportunities such as growing native plants from seed, planting natives, seed and plant exchanges, and garden maintenance.
3. Establish native pollinator landscaping demonstration sites throughout the community. Aim for large-scale projects to create the most persuasive demonstrations and biggest environmental impact.
4. Partner with Native Plant/Pollinator organizations and other communities that have native landscaping experience and can offer guidance for site preparation, planting and maintenance practices, help develop a list of recommended or approved native plants and seed mixes suitable to your local conditions. The Colorado Native Landscape Coalition is a resource for this information.
5. Offer community education programs on the benefits and techniques of native landscaping, providing multilingual access matched to your community needs. These programs could tie in to rebate programs. For example, some communities incentivize the removal of non-native turf grass.
6. Inventory possible sites for native landscape transformation in your community. Consider public parks, community centers, public buildings (and roofs), parking lot roofs, right of ways, streetscapes, and city-owned closed landfills.
7. Offer community turf-replacement workshops or literature on how to replace traditional turf with resilient, low-water native grass or forbs.
8. Utilize existing training activities to develop community leaders for native landscaping. CNLC members’ programs such as Audubon’s “Habitat Hero” program, the Butterfly Pavilion’s Urban Prairies Project, and People and Pollinators Action Network’s Pollinator Safe Communities Program, can serve as foundations for these efforts.
9. Establish programs to work directly with Homeowner Associations and other groups to promote widespread native landscaping and utilize sustainable land management practices.
10. Inspire native landscaping by offering in person or virtual native garden tours.
11. Celebrate native landscape achievements by establishing local native habitat awards.
12. Consider the use of pilot projects that demonstrate the use of native plants, organic noxious weed removal and site preparation techniques, and organic park and public open space management.

**II. Reform Development Codes**

Inevitably, local development codes decide either to encourage non-native landscaping (turfgrass, etc.) or native landscaping. Local governments should take advantage of their Code opportunities to promote native landscaping and maximize green space. For example, the percentage of yards allocated to turfgrass and impermeable areas could be limited. Commercial buildings, parks, street medians, and other public spaces can easily become much more wildlife and human-friendly.

Specific actions

1. Adopt policies to protect and enhance native vegetation when development occurs.
2. Consider modification to development codes that encourage or require a percentage of new plantings to include native plants.
3. Partner with landscape architects and other professionals to incorporate these reforms into standard design practices.
4. Work with other communities and organizations to develop a list of recommended or approved native plants that are appropriate for local conditions. Create a list of native plant alternatives that are environmentally superior to non-native species.
5. Incorporate the native plant list(s) into building and development codes.
6. Reduce the percentage of impermeable lot coverage.
7. Award developer’s actions based on number of implemented recommendations.
8. Permit no-mow zones in locations where there are no safety related concerns.

**III. Enhance Public Spaces**

Properties under the direct ownership or control of local governments present superb opportunities for management choices that favor native landscaping and then become a model for the community. Large acreages and high visibility make local government properties excellent choices for native plant transformation.

Specific actions

1. Local governments can adopt policies to landscape primarily with native plants on properties under their direct ownership or control (unless incompatible with the purposes of the property).
2. Local governments can adopt policies that reduce and eliminate the use of synthetic fertilizers and chemicals in their landscapes.
3. Build relationships with city agencies that can support native landscape projects. Consider parks departments, water providers, transportation departments, and solid waste management providers.
4. Provide training to Parks Department staff about native plant selection, planting and maintenance techniques, and seasonal timing, as well as the benefits of choosing natives.
5. Set specific native landscape goals for how much open space can be transformed into new native habitat. Local landscaping design and performance standards can be a way to define the goals.
6. Work with the local Parks Department to identify and expand native plants on their plant list available to city horticulture staff.
7. Design an outreach and education campaign to highlight new approaches to landscape creation and management.
8. Sponsor volunteer events to support planting projects and weed removal.

**IV. Commit to Environmental Justice**

Native Peoples, communities of color, and disinvested communities are often not a part of discussions about native landscaping. However, landscape transformation programs should emphasize equity, inclusiveness, and environmental justice. Appropriate effective local measures for this purpose should be adapted to the community.

A transition to native landscaping practices is also an act of decolonization. It recognizes both the harm that has been inflicted on generations of indigenous peoples and honors the values and practices of indigenous cultures who managed this land for millennia. A choice for native landscaping reflects that heritage.

Specific actions

1. Ensure that landscaping programs recognize the native plant heritage from the indigenous peoples of Colorado.
2. Include communities of color in the native landscape discussions.
3. Assure that the landscaping workforce is treated with equity and protected from exposure to toxics.
4. Provide access to education in maintenance practices, which is a major barrier for many.
5. Provide scholarships for certification in native landscaping need to be available.
6. Staff needs to be paid to attend classes and workshops in plant selection, proper planting and maintenance techniques, and seasonal timing.
7. Assure that landscaping classes are bilingual when necessary.
8. Provide bilingual educational signs at public native landscape sites.

**V. Reform “Xeriscaping”**

The “xeriscaping” term used since 1981 should be updated to explicitly recognize the many benefits of native plants. Although Colorado must continue to promote low-irrigation landscaping, it is time to recognize also the prime importance of native landscaping in that same effort. Water supply and land use organizations should modernize their usage of this concept.

Specific actions

1. Reform the definition of “xeriscape” to emphasize the dominant use of native plants.
2. Revise literature and programs promoting “xeriscaping” to implement this message.

**VI. Use Financial Incentives Wisely**

Local governments and water providers expend funds for many programs that should be reoriented toward native landscaping transformation. This would be a powerful message about native landscaping and also accomplish much within the programs themselves.

Specific actions

1. Promote, design, and fund turf conversion programs, with higher levels of assistance for conversions that emphasize native plants. Many existing turf-replacement programs promote “xeriscaping” and miss the opportunity to promote native plants.
2. Encourage landscape programs to emphasize native plants and provide a financial incentive for residents to make native landscaping choices.
3. Provide a significant fraction of native trees in tree discount programs for residents. Although the choice of trees native to Colorado may not always include a variety of tall or fast-growing species, many residents will prefer native trees and should be afforded that choice.
4. Develop and seek funding sources for incentive programs for community-led native landscape creation and enhancement. Consider sponsorships, grants, and fundraising events.
5. Provide education about noxious weed species and incentivize removal.

**APPENDIX**

Include a list of existing programs to emulate? Perhaps with any model ordinances?