

Native Lawn Establishment in Colorado

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There is growing interest in the use of native grasses for home lawns in Colorado. Once established, a native grass lawn will generally require less irrigation, mowing, and fertilization than traditional bluegrass or fescue lawns. However, the establishment of native lawns can be difficult, expensive, and frustrating – and native lawns still require some level of maintenance for them to remain vigorous and attractive. Whether beginning with a new landscape or converting an existing lawn to a native species, following some specific steps can help ensure success and reduce common problems often experienced when establishing the native lawn.

Is a Native Lawn Right for Me?



Buffalograss can produce a very attractive green lawn with minimal irrigation

A native grass lawn – once established – will generally require less water, mowing and fertilization than a bluegrass or fescue lawn. If your lawn is weedy, patchy, too large for current needs, or is

too expensive to irrigate, then you might consider a conversion to a native grass. It's important that you learn how to correctly manage a native lawn because its needs can differ greatly from those of traditional lawns.

What Should I Plant?

The two best and most commonly planted true native grasses for a Colorado native lawn are **buffalograss** and **blue grama**. These native species are called “warm-season grasses” because they grow best during the very warmest months (late May-early September), becoming dormant and brown the rest of the year. Less commonly used native cool-season species (grow best during the fall and spring months, often turning brown in summer unless irrigated) include **western wheatgrass**, **streambank wheatgrass**, and **prairie junegrass**. Grass seed mixtures labeled as “native” often contain little or no truly native grasses. It's best to purchase native seed, sod, or plugs from grass seed companies or sod producers experienced with growing and selling true natives (see list below).



Buffalograss and blue grama lawns will be brown and dormant from September-May

Native Lawn Checklist

- Check with city or HOA if your intent is to reduce mowing – to be aware of mowing height rules
- Choose the appropriate grass for your lawn – based on quality expectations, intended use, shade, elevation, how it will be established, and any city code restrictions
- Confirm source, availability, and cost of seed/sod/plugs
- Control problematic weeds BEFORE planting
- Time weed control, soil preparation, purchase of seed/sod/plugs to target optimal planting time
- Kill the existing lawn, but don't remove the dead grass
- Unless necessary, minimize or avoid soil tillage to reduce weed problems
- Provide adequate irrigation during the first growing season to promote establishment
- Manage weeds to reduce competition with grass
- Mowing at appropriate height during establishment year can promote spread of grass and reduce weeds
- Reduce or eliminate irrigation beginning in second year, as appropriate for species and lawn use
- Manage top growth by annual mowing or burning to maintain grass vigor

How are Native Lawns Planted?

All native grasses can be **seeded**, but planting by **sod or plugs** are also options for buffalograss and blue grama. **Sod** will provide the quickest results and weeds are unlikely to become a problem, but it's expensive and it can be difficult to find sod for these grasses.

Plugging can produce quick results, and some of the best quality buffalograss varieties are only sold as plugs or sod. Planting with plugs is less expensive than sodding, and may be comparable in cost to seeding. Planting at the optimal time of the year is important for native lawns, whether by sod, plugs or seed. Establishment problems are common when planting at the wrong time of the year, when weeds and existing grass aren't completely killed, when the new grass isn't watered correctly, and when weeds aren't managed.

How do I Care for a Native Lawn?

After the establishment year, native lawns can generally be irrigated quite minimally – if at all. During very dry summers, all native lawns will become dormant – especially if they are mowed. Unmowed native grasses will have better drought resistance and will often retain some green color during the longest dry periods. If a greener lawn is desired, applying 1-2 inches of water every 4-5 weeks (all at once, using soak cycles to prevent runoff) can keep a native lawn green during a dry summer. If mowing is a must, mow at the highest setting possible. Fertilize buffalograss/blue grama once yearly in July or August; fertilize wheatgrass and June grass in September.

Where aren't Native Lawns a Good Idea?

Situations where a native lawn might not work well:

- Shady lawns; native grasses do best in full sun
- Where there is heavy, constant foot traffic, pet activity, and other sources of wear
- At higher elevations (above 6500 feet) the growing season for buffalograss and blue grama is sometimes too short (but OK for wheatgrasses and junegrass).
- Where a very high quality lawn is desired; watering and fertilizing a native lawn in an effort to make it look like bluegrass often results in massive weed problems

Where can I get Native Grass Sod, Seed, and Plugs?

	Sod	Plugs	Seed
Pawnee Buttes Seed (Greeley) www.pawneebutteseed.com			Yes
Sharp Brothers Seed (Greeley) www.sharpseed.com			Yes
Arkansas Valley Seed (Denver) www.avseeds.com			Yes
Green Valley Sod (Littleton) www.gvt.net	Legacy buffalograss		Yes
Todd Valley Farms (Mead, NE) www.toddvalleyfarms.com	Legacy buffalograss	Legacy, Prestige buffalograss; blue grama	No
High Country Gardens www.highcountrygardens.com		Legacy, Prestige buffalograss; blue grama	Yes

Tips for Converting an Existing Lawn to Native

- Plant at the right time: buffalograss and blue grama seed anytime March to mid-August, but not later.
- Plant buffalograss and blue grama plugs or sod June-late August
- Kill existing lawn grasses and weeds with glyphosate or by solarizing before planting sod, seed, or plugs
- If sodding, remove the dead grass with a sod cutter prior to sodding
- Unless the soil is VERY compacted, avoid tilling, which increases weeds (but aerate the bare soil before sodding to encourage sod rooting)
- If seeding, mow the dead lawn very short and then aerate heavily to create a lot of holes
- Seed at a rate of 3-4 pounds of seed/1000 square feet and rake the seeded lawn with a leaf rake to work seed into the holes
- If planting plugs, mow the dead grass as short as possible before planting the plugs
- Apply a natural organic or slow-release synthetic fertilizer the same day as seeding or plugging
- Do NOT topdress the lawn with sand, soil, or peat moss after seeding or planting plugs
- Irrigate every 4-5 hours during the day to maintain even moisture, but not constant saturation, for sod, seed, or plugs
- Fertilize newly seeded or plugged lawns again 3-4 weeks after planting, and again 3-4 weeks
- Mow new buffalograss/blue grama sod, seed, or plugs at a 2 inch height to encourage spreading of the grass
- As weeds appear, they can be pulled; very small broadleaf weeds can be sprayed with Quicksilver herbicide (carfentrazone) without harming the grass. Grassy weeds can be sprayed with Tenacity (mesotrione) or quinclorac herbicides without harming the grass
- Reduce irrigation interval to once or twice weekly as the sod or plugs root, or the seed germinates
- Winter water during the first winter!