Native Plant Masters changing how Coloradans landscape

Statewide expansion of the nation’s only Native Plant Master™ education program encourages sustainable landscaping while increasing awareness about the threats to Colorado’s native plants from invasive weeds.

The Situation

Sustainable landscapes took on new relevance in the late 1990s as the state struggled from the effects of a multi-year drought and an increased spread of invasive alien weeds displacing native plants. CSU Extension responded by creating a Native Plant Master™ program to inspire awareness and understanding of the relationship between water conservation, native plants, weeds and sustainable landscapes.

Our Response

Jefferson County Extension launched the state’s first Native Plant Master (NPM) education program in 1997. The program trains a corps of volunteers who then educate the public about both the role and importance of native plants in creating sustainable landscapes, as well as the ecological impact of invasive weeds.

Volunteers take 36 hours of hands-on coursework taught by county agents and other NPM trainers on trails in local open space parks and other public lands. Field learning is supplemented by the Colorado Plant Database, Extension’s research-based online resource of more than 1,000 Colorado plants. Courses are open to the general public. Volunteers seeking NPM Certification agree to make 60 educational contacts each year.

The program has broad appeal attracting homeowners, garden center employees, landscape architects, open space planners, natural area docents, government employees, and private landowners. In 2009, 1,296 Coloradoans participated in 48 NPM courses and related classes offered by Extension with 458 volunteers providing educational outreach. Statewide program costs are supported by NPM fee revenues which totaled $30,809 in the same year.

Program Outcomes

With expertise in training adults as volunteers and educators of horticultural best practices, CSU Extension is uniquely suited to provide educational outreach that helps Coloradoans better understand how to conserve precious natural resources by adopting sustainable landscape choices.

In a 2009 statewide NPM survey, volunteers reported increasing native plant use in landscaping, educating thousands about the benefits of native plants, and working to control invasive alien weeds. The value volunteers placed on these efforts totaled $200,507 in 2009 alone. Volunteers who participated in NPM to enhance their job skills also reported that becoming a NPM has increased their ability to more effectively do their job – whether at a garden center or for local government.

The greatest benefit of the NPM program may well be its multiplier effect: a few hundred volunteers are trained and thousands are educated through neighbor-to-neighbor talks, on-the-job training, guided naturalist walks on public lands, and other learning opportunities. NPM is the leading statewide entity with the expertise and resources to train adults how to inform others about the relationship between water conservation, native plants, weeds and sustainable landscapes. As a result, CSU Extension has found a cost-effective way to increase the sustainability of Colorado’s backyards and wildlands one native plant at a time.
Testimonial

“As an open space planner, I evaluate acquisition proposals for potential benefits to the open space system. That evaluation includes a site visit. Through my training in the Native Plant Master courses, I am better able to identify native and alien species and to pass this information along to my colleagues including the Natural Resource staff…by providing specifics that may prompt further site investigations prior to presentations to decision makers.”

By the Numbers

2009 NPM By the Numbers

458 NPM Volunteers

28,489 Direct educational contacts

$30,809 NPM Revenues

$1 = $7.50 Estimated Cost/Benefit: Jefferson County NPM

The Bottom Line

- For every dollar Extension spent on non-personnel program costs in Jefferson County, NPM volunteers generated $7.50 in self-reported savings from sustainable landscaping and weed control efforts.

- CSU Extension’s Native Plant Master education program is helping Coloradans recognize the importance of using native plants as a water-saving resource in creating sustainable landscapes.

- CSU Extension is helping Coloradans learn to identify invasive weeds and the threats they pose to the health of native plants in the wild.

- CSU Extension is the leading statewide entity with the expertise and resources to train adults who then educate the public about the relationship between water conservation, native plants, weeds and sustainable landscapes.

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