

Native Plant Master education benefits natural resources and people

Extension's Native Plant Master® education program encourages Coloradans to adopt sustainable landscaping practices that can help residents save water, money and time.

Issue

Colorado's growing population increases demand for limited natural resources, especially water. Urban gardens and other built landscapes often use non-native plants that have high water needs. These plants are not adapted to Colorado's dry climate—the state averages 17 inches of precipitation annually. Native plants offer a sustainable alternative when nursery grown and planted in conditions approximating their native habitat. Homeowners, landowners, and green industry and land management professionals are seeking education about the relationship between water conservation, native plants, invasive weeds and sustainable landscapes.

Extension's Response

Colorado State University Extension created the Native Plant Master® (NPM) field-based education and volunteer program. The goal of the program is to educate people about how native plants can be used to create sustainable landscapes and the threats to native ecosystems from invasive weeds. Native Plant Master volunteers are trained to help the public understand the benefits of native plants. Jefferson County Extension launched the state's first NPM training in 1997. The program is now offered by 12 Extension offices across the state.

All NPM courses are open to the general public. To earn certification in the optional volunteer program, participants take 36 to 38 hours of hands-on coursework and agree to make at least 60 educational contacts. The program uses the natural world as an outdoor classroom to teach volunteers about sustainable landscapes. Courses are taught by county agents and other NPM trainers on trails in local open space parks and other public lands. Field learning is supplemented by CSU Extension's online Colorado Plant Database which provides research-based information on more than 1,000 Colorado plants: <http://coloradoplants.jeffco.us>.

The education program attracts a broad range of individuals from homeowners, garden center employees, landscape architects and open space planners, to natural area docents, government employees, and small acreage landowners. Each year participants are surveyed about the sustainable landscaping and weed mitigation projects they were involved in as well as their satisfaction with the overall NPM experience. On a quarterly basis volunteers catalog the number and type of educational contacts they have made.



The Bottom Line

- In one year, for every dollar Extension spent on program costs in Jefferson County, NPM volunteers generated \$8.43 in self-reported savings from sustainable landscaping and weed control efforts.
- Extension's Native Plant Master® education program encourages Coloradans to adopt sustainable landscaping practices while enhancing the job performance of many program participants.

By the Numbers

- Reported statewide economic impact: \$1,232,028¹
- Reported acreage impacted statewide: 156,149
- Estimated Cost/Benefit of NPM in Jefferson County: \$1 = \$8.43
- NPM Revenues: \$26,512
- NPM Volunteers: 625
- Direct educational contacts: 14,034

Impact

The NPM education program is a state leader in training people 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 commercial landscapes while reducing invasive weeds.

Results from the 2010 statewide NPM survey highlight many benefits the program brings both participants and the people they contact through paid and volunteer work. Of the 220 participants who responded to the survey:

- 99 percent increased their native and non-native plant identification skills
- 92 percent increased their awareness of the impact of alien weeds and the importance of controlling them
- 91 percent increased awareness of the value of native plants for sustainable landscaping.

As a result of these changes in knowledge and attitude, the majority of participants reported that they began or increased planting of natives in sustainable landscapes. Many said they began or expanded weed removal projects. These combined efforts occurred on over 150,000 acres of public and private land. By reducing water use and other landscaping costs and improving land productivity through weed removal, the economic impact of these efforts (as estimated by survey respondents) totaled over \$1.2 million.

Many participants also reported that NPM benefited them in the workplace. One participant explained, "I work with a lot of large and small landowners on seeding recommendations, grazing strategies and weed control. The increased ability to identify native grasses has improved my ability to assist local landowners with range monitoring and pasture management." In fact, 31 percent of the 2010 NPM survey respondents reported getting a new job or retaining their current job as a result of participating in the program.

The NPM education program has a beneficial multiplier-effect as thousands of Coloradans are annually educated by a few hundred NPM volunteers. The opportunities take the form of guided naturalist walks on public lands, on-the-job trainings, meetings and decision-making, neighbor-to-neighbor exchanges, and other outreach and learning opportunities.

Native Plant Master Mission

To educate the public about native plants in order to foster stewardship, sustainable landscaping and management of weeds that threaten native ecosystems.

¹ Economic impact stems from alien weed control efforts (resulting from improved grazing, crop output, ornamental landscapes, wildlife habitat, tourism, etc.), and planting of natives (resulting from reduced landscape inputs such as watering, pruning, pest control, etc.).

"I use what I learned from NPM daily—in making recommendations to landowners, selecting plants to seed for County revegetation projects, and as a motivator to continue working tirelessly to control and eradicate noxious weeds."

– Native Plant Master volunteer

"Since my property burned in the Fourmile Canyon Fire, I am actively participating in volunteer efforts to assemble resources for landowners to identify plants that re-grow on their burned land and to avoid an increase in exotic species invasions."

– Native Plant Master volunteer

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