

Impact

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

Learning about native plants supports natural resource conservation

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

Issue

Colorado's growing population puts increased demand on limited natural resources, especially water. Urban gardens and landscapes are often planted with water-hungry, non-native species. At the same time, non-native noxious weeds invade natural landscapes and pose a threat to native ecosystems. Residents and landowners—as well as green industry and land management professionals—seek landscaping solutions that conserve natural resources.

Extension's Response

Colorado State University Extension created the Native Plant Master (NPM) education and volunteer program 15 years ago, to raise awareness about native plants, sustainable landscapes and threats to native ecosystems, including invasive weeds.

Jefferson County Extension launched the state's first NPM training in 1997. Today, 14 Extension offices around the state offer hands-on courses taught by county agents and other NPM trainers. Each course is divided into three sessions which cover:

- Plant identification using a key along with a botanical field guide;
- Ecological relationships between noxious weeds, native plants and insects, birds and wildlife;
- Landscape and other human uses for Colorado native plants.

Native Plant Master instructors teach courses on trails in local open space parks and other public lands. This means participants see firsthand the plants inhabiting the ecosystems and life zones that are unique to the area. Field learning is supplemented by CSU Extension's online Colorado Plant Database (<http://coloradoplants.jeffco.us>) which provides research-based information on more than 1,000 Colorado plants.

These courses are open to the general public; volunteer certification is optional. To earn certification, participants must pass three courses and make at least 60 educational contacts from leading nature walks as a docent at a natural area and educating customers to talking with neighbors about native and non-native plants.

The education program has continually attracted 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. In 2011, 926 individuals were trained in NPM courses and special classes. That same year, a total of 395 volunteers reported 17,901 educational contacts using information they learned from the program.



The Bottom Line

- In 2011, for every dollar Extension spent on non-personnel program costs in Jefferson County, NPM participants quadrupled that 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: \$95,395¹
- Reported acreage impacted statewide: 164,526
- Reported Cost/Benefit of NPM in Jefferson County: \$1 = \$4.06
- NPM Revenues: \$24,942
- NPM Volunteers: 395
- NPM Participants: 926
- Direct educational contacts: 17,901

Impact

The Native Plant Master education and volunteer program has become a state leader in training people about the relationship between water conservation, native plants, alien invasive weeds and sustainable landscapes. The program is coordinated by the CSU Extension Native Plant Education team, which received the 2011 Extension Team Distinguished Service Award.

Thousands of Coloradans are annually educated by a few hundred NPM volunteers. The team annually measures this impact through a survey asking program participants to report on sustainable landscaping and weed mitigation projects they complete. In 2011, volunteers from across the state reported a combined savings of \$44,920 from reduced landscape inputs such as water, pruning and pest control as a result of planting native species on more than 85,000 acres of public and private land.

Volunteers also reported a combined \$50,475 in savings from improved grazing, crop output, ornamental landscapes, wildlife and tourism, and beginning or increasing weed control efforts of non-native plants—on more than 79,000 acres of public and private land. These figures indicate that CSU Extension has found a cost-effective way to increase the sustainability of Colorado's public and private landscapes while reducing invasive weeds.

Additional results from the 2011 statewide NPM survey highlight many of the program's benefits to both participants and the people they contact through volunteer and paid work. Survey respondents reported that:

- 96 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;
- 89 percent increased awareness of the use of native plants for sustainable landscaping.

Sixty respondents reported that taking the NPM program helped them retain their current job or get a new one. This happens across vastly different fields of both paid and volunteer work as shown by these quotes from the survey:

- *I took two NPM classes prior to applying for a position on with the city's ecological restoration crew. I was told that my experience identifying native and invasive plants was a deciding factor in my selection.*
- *I worked for two golf courses and thanks to this program I was able to change landscaping on the courses into more native areas, reducing labor, and water and chemical use. This helped save the golf course's money and helped me retain my job.*
- *I was campaigning for elected office by canvassing the neighborhoods in my district. I used the knowledge I gained from the Native Plant Master courses to speak to voters and constituents about their lawns and sustainable gardens.*

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 self-reported savings related to improved grazing, crop output, ornamental landscapes, wildlife habitat, tourism, and reduced landscape inputs such as watering, pruning, pest control, etc., as a result of alien weed control and planting natives.

"It is the best educational experience I have had through my local Extension office. It is outside, hands-on, taught by passionate, intelligent people, and has real world applications."

– Native Plant Master program participant

"I have used my identification skills to educate my crew mates about what plants to collect for restoration projects, what plants to leave alone, and what plants to remove during invasive plant control efforts."

– Native Plant Master program participant

Native Plant Master County & Area Partners

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