

# Native Lawn Establishment in Colorado

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EXTENSION

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 seed companies or sod producers experienced with growing and selling native grasses (see list below).



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

## Native Lawn Checklist

- Check with city or HOA to be aware of any species or mowing height rules before planting a native species
- Choose the appropriate grass – based on intended use, quality expectations, shade, elevation, establishment method, and any city code restrictions
- Confirm source, availability, and cost of seed/sod/plugs
- Control problematic weeds BEFORE planting
- Stage pre-plant weed control, soil preparation, purchase of seed or sod/plugs to plant at optimal time
- Kill the existing lawn, but don't remove the dead grass
- Minimizing or avoiding soil tillage will reduce weed problems
- Provide adequate irrigation at planting and during the first growing season to promote establishment
- Manage weeds to reduce competition with new seeding grass or plugs
- Mowing at appropriate height during establishment year can promote spread of grass and reduce weeds
- Begin to reduce or eliminate irrigation beginning in second year, if the grass is sufficiently established
- Manage top growth by ONCE annual mowing (collect debris) to maintain grass vigor and/or for mitigation of fire concerns

## 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. Problems are more likely 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 after planting seed or plugs.

## 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 Native Lawns May Not Perform Well

- Shady lawns; native grasses do best in full sun (though hard, Chewings, and sheep fescues will do well in shade)
- Under heavy, constant foot traffic (pets, play activity)
- At elevations above 7000 feet the growing season for buffalograss is often too short (blue grama does better; hard, Chewings, sheep fescues do well in high-elevation lawns).
- Watering and fertilizing a native lawn to make it look like bluegrass will encourage weeds

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

	Sod	Plugs	Seed
Pawnee Buttes Seed (Greeley) www.pawneebuttesseed.com	no	no	Yes
Buffalo Brand Seed (Greeley) www.buffalobrandseed.com	no	no	Yes
Arkansas Valley Seed (Denver) www.avseeds.com	no	no	Yes
Todd Valley Farms (Mead, NE) www.toddvalleyfarms.com	Legacy buffalograss	Legacy, Prestige buffalograss; blue grama	No

## Tips for Converting a Bluegrass Lawn to Buffalograss or Blue Grama

- Plant at the right time: seed buffalograss and blue grama anytime March to mid-August, but not later.
- Plant buffalograss and blue grama plugs or sod June-mid 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 (increases weed pressure); OK to aerate untilled, 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 – the more holes the better!
- Seed at a rate of 3-5 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, **OR** apply Scotts Starter Food plus Weed Preventer (mesotrione) to control weeds and fertilize the new seedlings
- Do NOT topdress the lawn with sand, soil, or peat moss after seeding or planting plugs
- For the first 3-4 weeks after planting, irrigate new sod, plugs, or seed every 4-5 hours (just a few minutes each time) during the day to maintain even soil moisture, but not constant saturation. If soil is overly wet or there is standing water, water less frequently and/or for shorter periods of time
- Fertilize newly seeded or plugged lawns every 3-4 weeks after planting with slow-release or organic fertilizer (but don't apply any fertilizer after late August)
- Mow new buffalograss/blue grama sod, seed, or plugs at a 2-inch height to encourage spreading of the grass; DON'T let grass grow too high before mowing
- The occasional weed can be pulled
- If a lot of weeds appear, young, seedling 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. **Follow all label instructions!!!**
- Reduce irrigation interval to once or twice weekly after sod/plugs have rooted, or seed has germinated and grass is growing well. Water often enough to prevent stress during this first growing season.
- Winter water during the first winter!