

# WATER WISE: Consider native plants for home landscapes

*University of Nebraska Extension, the Nebraska Forest Service and the Cities of Gering, Scottsbluff and Terrytown are working together to provide information on how to conserve water by using it wisely and the benefits that come from doing so.*

Homeowners should consider using native plants for the majority of their landscape plants and minimize the use of exotic plants, according to Amy Seiler, Community Forestry Specialist with the Nebraska Forest Service.

Native plants are ideal, according to Seiler, because they have adapted to the unique conditions of western Nebraska over thousands of years. Great Plains plants are adapted to the very high temperatures and low humidity in the summer, but also very low temperatures in winter.

One key to Great Plains plants' success is their ability to put down deep roots that tap farther into the soil profile, allowing them to survive extremely dry years like the summer of 2012. But they can also withstand very wet years like 2011, because those same deep roots also break up the soil compaction and allow water to drain more quickly, preventing the crown and roots from rotting, Seiler pointed out.

Seiler said homeowners will reap many benefits from using native plants. Once native landscapes are established (usually two to three years, depending on species), watering can be reduced significantly or even removed, and the plantings will thrive. Native plants keep their form best and do not tend to seed down as prolifically if they are



limited to rainfall.

Homeowners will find they are using significantly less water, possibly enough to translate into significantly lower utility bills, she said.

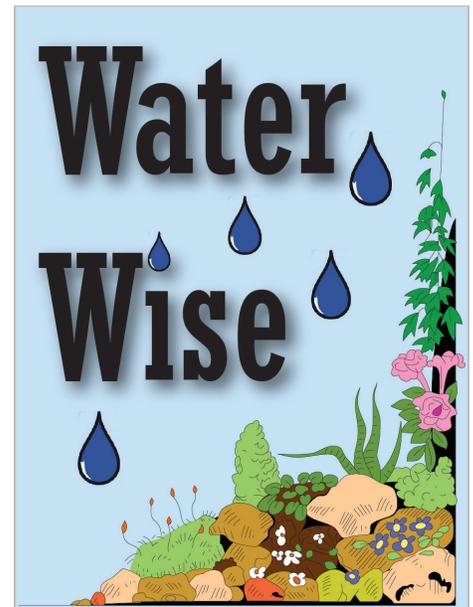
Native plants also require less pesticides and fertilizers. Many natives have developed their own defenses against pests and diseases. And removing pesticides allows naturally occurring predatory insects to control other pests in the landscape. Fertilizer is unnecessary when using natives because it pushes the plants into unnatural growth levels that they are not adapted to maintain.

Using native plants in the landscape also attracts indigenous insects, birds and wildlife, which will thrive in a familiar habitat, Seiler said.

Finally, using natives in the landscape conveys enjoyment of the native landscape of the Great Plains, and replicates that beauty around homes.

Notable regional natives that should be used in the landscape include the plants on this list, which also have attractive blooms, plentiful fruits, and seeds and showy fall color:

- **Trees:** Limber pine, ponderosa pine, Rocky Mountain juniper, hackberry, bur oak, cottonwood.
- **Shrubs:** American plum, Apache plume, common chokecherry, skunkbush sumac, mountain mahogany, rabbitbrush, Saskatoon serviceberry, silver buffaloberry, western sandcherry.
- **Perennials:** Butterfly milkweed, goldenrod, leadplant, penstemons, purple prairie clover, spiderwort, scarlet globe mallow, common milkweed.



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- **Grasses:** (ornamental or for turf) sandlove grass, little bluestem, big bluestem, Indian grass, prairie drop seed, buffalograss, blue grama

Seiler noted that native plants at nurseries sometimes look ragged or undesirable in their containers. This is because they prefer less water, but nurseries typically are on a strict watering schedule because their exotic annuals and other ornamental plants demand more water.

Her recommendation: This is common among native plants, but purchase them anyway. Once they are incorporated into the home landscape and irrigation is reduced, the plants will resume their natural beauty and look amazing.

The website of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, <http://arboretum.unl.edu/nsa-publications>, has lots more information on the plants listed and other plants native to Nebraska and the Great Plains.