



## Practical Tips Planting Native Perennials and Annuals



Native plants<sup>1</sup> bring beauty to your landscape and provide an alluring paradise for birds, bees, beetles, and other beneficial insects. If you plan carefully and wisely, your landscape can also be easy to maintain.

### Soil and habitat considerations

- Growing conditions vary across ecoregions in the county and within your property. Light and water availability will be different at various locations and around structures. A common characteristic is that our soils tend to be highly alkaline and contain little organic matter.
- Match plants to your growing conditions and soil type. Because changing soil characteristics (such as pH level or permeability) is challenging, choose plants to align with your soil characteristics.
- Know your soil type.<sup>2</sup>
- Although most plants native to our ecoregion are adapted to grow well in our low-fertility soils, most will benefit from the addition of some organic matter.
- If you have severely compacted soil, break up the top level of soil and mix in organic matter (like compost) before planting.

### Planting from nursery containers

- The day before planting, water the container plant thoroughly.
- Dig a hole slightly deeper than the root ball and two (or even three) times as wide to give the plant's roots room to get established.
- Carefully remove plant from container and loosen roots if plant is pot-bound. This can be done by scoring the sides and bottom of the root ball with a garden knife or trowel.
- Place plant into hole so that the top of the root ball is slightly lower than surrounding soil.
- Break up soil removed from hole. If desired, mix a small amount of worm castings or organic matter into removed soil and into the bottom of hole. Refill with soil, gently packed.
- Create a shallow berm around plant to hold irrigation water. Add mulch and water thoroughly—twice!
- Provide temporary protection from critters and sun, if needed.

### Mulching

- *Organic mulches*—such as wood chips, compost, pecan shells, or pine needles—break down over time, improving your soil's fertility and feeding the beneficial microorganisms in the soil. *Inorganic mulches*—such as gravel, rocks, scoria—last longer than organic mulches and are better on slopes for protecting against erosion.
- Some native plants prefer organic mulches while others prefer inorganic mulches. If you're uncertain about the mulch to use, look at the plant's native habitat.

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the Environmental Protection Agency, native plants are those “that have evolved over thousands of years to be able to survive in a particular region, and have adapted to the geography, hydrology, and climate of that region.”

<sup>2</sup> Soil testing resources: (1) NMSU Guide A-114—Test Your Garden Soil: [pubs.nmsu.edu/\\_a/A114.pdf](https://pubs.nmsu.edu/_a/A114.pdf),  
(2) Colorado State University Soil Testing Laboratory—[agsci.colostate.edu/soiltestinglab/](https://agsci.colostate.edu/soiltestinglab/),  
(3) Ward Laboratories—[www.wardlab.com/](https://www.wardlab.com/),  
(4) Crop Services International—[www.cropservicesintl.com](https://www.cropservicesintl.com)

- Add two to three inches of mulch around plant to retain moisture and reduce weed growth.

### Watering—major principles

- Know the water requirements of your plants — some plants prefer damp soil while some prefer dry soil. Mimic the conditions of the plant’s native environment. All plants (except cacti) need regular watering until established!
- Know the permeability of your soil — sandy soils dry out quickly while soils high in clay absorb water slowly but hold more water.
- Group your plants based on water needs and plan supplemental irrigation accordingly.
- Use a drip system or hand watering instead of sprinklers to get water to the roots of plants where it’s needed.
- Water deeply to encourage root growth.
- Follow City of Santa Fe watering restrictions.<sup>3</sup>
- Use a soil moisture meter if you’re unsure about whether your plants need water.
- During the winter if there has been no consistent snow/rain, water once month on warm days when the ground is not frozen. In our area, winter watering is critical, especially for new transplants.

### Watering to establish new plantings

- First week: Water deeply twice on the day you plant, then again on days 2, 3, 5 and 7.
- First 2 to 3 months: Water 2 or 3 times a week.
- Remainder of dry season: Water weekly.

### Watering after plants are established

- As a rough rule of thumb, larger shrubs can be considered established after three to four seasons while smaller perennials are considered established after two to four seasons.
- Know your plants’ water needs and provide supplemental water when necessary.

### Maintenance

- Remove weeds *before* they disperse their seeds.
- Replenish mulch as needed, typically in spring and fall.
- Where possible, do your “fall cleanup” in the spring. This ensures habitat and food for insects and small mammals and allows you to enjoy the beauty of the plants such as grasses in the winter.
- Monitor for pests and diseases. Do not use broad spectrum pesticide! Instead, identify the problem and employ IPM (Integrated Pest Management)<sup>4</sup>.

### Online resources

- Santa Fe Extension Master Gardeners — [www.sfemg.org](http://www.sfemg.org)
- Santa Fe Native Plant Project webpage — [www.sfemg.org/santa-fe-native-plant-project](http://www.sfemg.org/santa-fe-native-plant-project)
- Desert Blooms blog of the NMSU Cooperative Extension Service — [desertblooms.nmsu.edu/](http://desertblooms.nmsu.edu/)
- CSU Fact Sheet: Mulches for Home Gardens — [extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/garden/07214.pdf](http://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/garden/07214.pdf)
- Xerces Society: Save the Stems — [xerces.org/publications/brochures/save-the-stems](http://xerces.org/publications/brochures/save-the-stems)

### Books (available at Santa Fe Library)

- *Growing the Southwest Garden* — Judith Phillips, 2015
- *High and Dry: Gardening with Cold-Hardy Dryland Plants* — Robert Nold, 2008

---

<sup>3</sup> City of Santa Fe time of day watering restrictions – [santafenm.gov/news/time-of-day-watering-restrictions-in-effect-1](http://santafenm.gov/news/time-of-day-watering-restrictions-in-effect-1)

<sup>4</sup> NMSU Guide CR-655: Integrated Pest Management for Home Gardeners – [pubs.nmsu.edu/\\_circulars/CR655.pdf](http://pubs.nmsu.edu/_circulars/CR655.pdf)