

Reduced Maintenance Grass Areas for HOAs

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In an effort to reduce management inputs (water, mowing, fertilization, pest management) and labor, HOAs often consider the replacement of mowed, irrigated turf (bluegrass, fescues) with grass species (usually referred to as “native grasses”) that should require fewer inputs (less/no water, infrequent mowing, no fertilizer, few pesticides). These areas are often referred to as “native grass” areas because their unmowed (or less frequently mowed) appearance sometimes looks like that of an unmanaged, native prairie.



The impact and management of these low maintenance/“native” areas can be a point of contention within HOA communities – especially for those who live adjacent to them and are most affected by their appearance and other potential impacts.

Concerns often voiced about native/low-maintenance grass stands

It looks unkept and messy – and it always turns brown

People who favor the look of more intensively managed, mowed and irrigated lawns will generally be of this opinion. Others view these areas as natural and attractive. When conversion from managed lawns to native, unmowed grass is being considered, it is essential that it be a community-based decision, that communication be constant and open, and that the process be honest (about aesthetics, cost, process, timelines, maintenance) so that unpleasant surprises about the outcome and final product be minimized. The reasons for having existing native areas in a community (to minimize maintenance costs, reduce/eliminate irrigation, to encourage wildlife, etc.) should be conveyed to newcomers to the community. Well-meaning (but misguided) attempts to make native grass stands look more attractive and “lawn-like” (mowing, irrigating, fertilizing) often promote weed growth and will markedly decrease visual aesthetics – because the grasses used to develop native areas are not adapted to mowing and grow best with little/no irrigation and no fertilizer.

Native grass areas are weedy and ugly

The presence of unmanaged weeds in low-maintenance grass stands can detract from their visual beauty and result in legitimate complaints from those living in closest proximity. Having an effective, ongoing weed management plan in place is essential when planning and managing these natural areas. It often takes 3-4 years from planting for native/natural grass areas to become established and more attractive. During that establishment period, weeds are guaranteed to be a problem – so consistent weed management is essential. Once established AND properly maintained (NO mowing, NO water, NO fertilizer), weeds will become much less problematic. That said, spot treatment with herbicides (or manual removal) will always be a part of an ongoing native grass stand management program.



Native areas turn brown during dry weather, becoming a fire hazard

Native grass areas rarely remain green for an entire growing season in Colorado. Cool-season grasses (wheatgrass, bromegrass, wildrye, junegrass) will become dormant during most summers unless they receive supplemental irrigation. This is a normal process for cool-season species. During unusually dry summers, warm-season grasses (bluestems, blue grama, buffalograss) may also become dormant – and warm-season species are always dormant during the coldest periods of the year (October-May). It is true that dormant grass stands can burn easily, so maintaining defensible space near dwellings is an important consideration. Well-designed native areas will be far enough distant from dwellings and buildings that preventive mowing for fire concerns should be minimal.

Tall grass attracts unwanted wildlife (snakes, rodents, predators)



One reason that native grass areas are planted is to encourage wildlife in urban areas. The taller grasses can provide shelter, nesting sites and food for birds, small animals, pollinators, butterflies and other desirable wildlife (including snakes). Occasional problems with nuisance wildlife can usually be successfully managed with the guidance and assistance of animal control and/or wildlife agencies. The most common nuisance animal problem associated with tall grass areas is the vole, which can cause problems for turf and ornamentals in managed landscapes. Vole populations are cyclical, so many years may go by without them causing landscape

damage. Rabbit populations are not necessarily encouraged by the presence of tall grass areas; they thrive in well-managed landscapes far from any native grass areas.

The tall native grass will cause more insect problems (mosquitoes, flies, ticks, spiders)

If managed properly, native grass areas won't increase populations of problem insects. In fact, increased numbers of predatory insects will more than balance out any increased numbers of mosquitoes and flies. When grasshopper numbers are high, they will be attracted to the taller grass and away from ornamental landscape areas because the taller grass helps protect the grasshoppers from predators. Mowing tall grass during summers when grasshopper numbers are high will cause them to move into nearby vegetable and flower gardens.



The native grasses are weedy and will invade lawns and gardens

Some non-native grass species planted to emulate native areas (smooth brome grass, for example) can escape into adjacent lawns and gardens, but these invasions are generally minor and relatively easy to manage. Some native species, like buffalograss, blue grama and little bluestem can seed into adjacent lawns or invade them by their creeping growth habit. These invasions generally go unnoticed by most people and are relatively minor.

Some common misconceptions about managing native grass areas

- **Mowing is good for native grass areas**

Mowing – especially mowing at lawn height – can be very damaging and often results in weed invasion into the close-cut native areas. It is more difficult for weeds to survive in native areas if they are NOT mowed with any regularity. Mowing can actually result in more rapid dormancy and browning than if the grass is left unmowed.



- **It is OK to water native areas to keep them green in the summer**



Temporary irrigation of newly seeded native areas can help with establishment, but water should be discontinued once the grass is established (usually by the end of the second growing season). Continued irrigation will cause excessive growth, encourage weeds, and can create ideal conditions for some insects (mosquitoes) to flourish. These grasses do best when NOT irrigated or fertilized.

- **It is easy to switch from tall grass to lawn, simply by mowing it down and watering it**

Most of the grass species used to establish low-maintenance grass areas will NOT tolerate lawn height mowing and will thin out dramatically when mowed – resulting in a very unattractive “lawn”. Conversion back to lawn will require that the native grass be killed and lawn type grasses be planted. Native grasses and non-natives planted to establish low-maintenance “native” areas perform best if unmowed – or mowed once yearly.



- **Mowing native grass areas is not harmful to wildlife living there**

The nesting of grassland birds (lark buntings, meadowlarks, sparrows) living in natural grass areas is disrupted by mowing between early April and early September. If native areas are to be mowed, it should be done no more than once annually (preferably mid-February to mid-March) to reduce impacts on birds and other beneficial wildlife living there.

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Go to these sites for information on managing all aspects of your landscape:

CSU Extension extension.colostate.edu
CSU PlantTalk <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/ptlk/>
CSU CO-Horts blog www.csuhort.blogspot.com

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