An Explanation of Native Grass Within Your Community's Landscape

What to expect and why:

Most of the metropolitan areas of Colorado are considered high mountain prairie where certain plants and landscape features will grow much better than others. One of those features is native grasslands.

Due to the vastness of many of the common area landscapes of our communities and housing developments and based on the requirements of certain cities, towns and municipalities, native grasses are used in areas where other turf species simply aren't practical because of their maintenance requirements and water consumption needs. With the proper care, native grass requires significantly less resources to establish and maintain in our challenging climate.

Developing and nurturing a native landscape is a thoughtful maintenance program through the seeding and development stage. While most people look at a newly seeded native area and see an unkempt landscape, there needs to be an understanding of how these areas perform and should be maintained in order to allow them to fill in and present the beautiful appearance it is intended to have.

Once established, native areas don't require regular watering or mowing like some grasses. Large areas that do use non-native grasses can quickly deplete our water supply and divert the scarce resource away from drinking, bathing and other uses in our everyday life.

Native vegetation loves natural moisture and thrives in temperatures in the 60-75 degree range. This is why these areas will most closely resemble a more familiar "bluegrass-like" appearance in the spring and early summer. Then as the season progresses, the green appearance will give way to more of an open field or prairie-like appearance. Do not be alarmed in June and July when this happens.

Expenses associated with utilizing non-native plant materials can also add up quickly. Many non-native grasses require substantial maintenance costs for fertilizing, weed control and weekly mowing. These expenses can deplete funds that could be used for other items like insurance, amenities, or trash collection.

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While native areas can help reduce overall landscaping cost, they do require special care. Native grasses germinate and develop when the soil is cooler in the late Spring and Fall. In order to “go to seed” these grasses must not be cut but left to grow to a point (generally 12-16”) where seed heads develop and spread. For best results, mowing native areas seldomly between June and October is optimal, but must often be balanced with the perception and the appearance goals of the community.

Furthermore, to yield beautiful native areas you must plan to control noxious, and unsightly weeds. Similar to mowing, there is a proper time for performing weed control based on the area’s stage of development. Newer, or less full native areas should never have preventative herbicide applications performed. These treatments will have an adverse effect on the area and will prevent the germination process and overall growth.

Instead, applications of herbicides should be performed a week or two after mowing for best results. For newly seeded and developing areas, less weed control is required. Unfortunately, this means that undesirable weeds will be present, and must be tolerated while the native grass develops. However, spot spraying of native weeds can be performed to target certain weeds without damaging the native areas development.

As native areas develop and improve, additional post-emergent applications can be performed. Generally, this means two applications per year performed in conjunction with mowing. Older, more established and full native can be treated with well-timed herbicide applications in the late spring, and can be coupled with another application in the mid to late summer.

Like many things, patience is key. You must be sure your community has an intentional plan when deciding to install and maintain native areas your community. While it takes time to develop, the results will be an enjoyable landscape that supports water conservation.