

What Can I Plant?

By Janet Vetter, CSU Extension Master Gardener in Larimer County

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What can I plant? That sounds like a fairly straight-forward question, but the answer is far more complicated. Gardening in the mountains can be challenging. The air is dry. The sun is harsh. The soil may be thin and rocky. But gardeners are optimists! By understanding the limiting factors of your site, you can make selections that will provide a show of color throughout your short--but glorious--growing season!

The growing season in Estes Park is basically early June through mid-September; less than 100 frost-free days. The cool summer nights of mountain communities also affect plant growth. The USDA Hardiness Zone for Estes Park is shown on the map as Zone 5, but it might be safer to stick with plants that are Zone 4 or lower. Picking plants for hardiness zones 2-4 will be especially good selections for your area. Select flowering perennials that bloom early or mid-season; late-blooming flowers may never get the chance before frost. Pick cool-tolerant vegetables with short growing seasons, such as lettuces, arugula, spinach, turnips, radishes, beets, carrots, and snap peas.

Your plant selections need to match the conditions of your site. Take note of the amount of sun you receive daily; a "full sun" perennial will struggle in a shady corner. You may need to amend your soil with organic material, especially if it is decomposed granite. A soil test would be a good first step to determine what you need to do to grow healthy plants.

If you're wondering what to plant, look at the local public garden spaces around town. Take pictures of plants you like and then look for them at a local garden center or on an online site. Many Colorado native plants are already adapted to your conditions and would provide a good backbone for a perennial border. Native plants can often be successfully grown in unamended soils, and can support a wide variety of wildlife throughout the season. Native plants should not be collected from the wild. Transplanting from the wild to the garden is rarely successful because of root damage and transplant shock, and is likely illegal. Colorado natives are adapted to different habitats, so be sure to pick plants that are suited to your environment.

Think about deer-resistant plant varieties. Frankly, a hungry animal will eat just about any plant, so nothing is 100% deer-proof. There are online publications that list plants, trees, and shrubs that are deer-resistant. A basic strategy is to plant a majority of strongly aromatic plants that create an invisible barrier to your garden, followed by plant selections that have a bitter taste, coarse texture, prickles or spines, or milky sap. Spray emerging and newly planted foliage with a deer repellent for at least 3 weeks. By confusing a deer's sense of smell and taste, you have a better chance that they will leave your property for someone else's.

Containers and raised beds are also good choices, especially for vegetables and annual flowering plants. If you are constructing a raised bed with an open bottom, put hardware cloth over the base before filling with a planting medium to prevent damage from voles or pocket gophers. Containers can be moved to protect annual plants from an unexpected frost and can be used to fill a void in a flower border or bring season-long color to a porch or patio.

If you're looking for further inspiration, The Betty Ford Alpine Gardens in Vail and the Yampa River Botanic Park in Steamboat Springs are two high elevation public gardens worth visiting. Rock and crevice gardens, shady groves, and sunny perennial borders all display a wide diversity of plants that will work for you as well.

High elevation gardening presents some challenges, including a short growing season. By observing the conditions of your specific site and selecting the right plants for the right place, you will be rewarded with beauty throughout the summer!

Resources from CSU Extension:

Trees and Shrubs for Mountain Areas: <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/garden/07423.pdf>

Flowers for Mountain Communities: <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/garden/07406.pdf>

Estes Valley Community Garden Board thanks Master Gardener Janet Vetter for providing these garden planning tips tailored to our gardening challenges.