



URBAN PLANTING GUIDE

GRANTS FOR GRASS - TIER 3

Properties in incorporated areas and densely developed zones within the Big Wood watershed. Projects focus on high-visibility native landscapes that reduce irrigation demand, support urban pollinators, and demonstrate community-scale conservation.



WHAT IS THIS GUIDE?

This guide is designed for homeowners, renters, commercial property managers, and community members with properties in Ketchum, Hailey, Bellevue, Sun Valley, or other incorporated areas of Blaine County. It provides a focused framework for converting high-water-use ornamental landscaping to native, drought-tolerant plants suited to urban conditions.

Urban projects under Grants for Grass are some of the most visible in the program. Front yards, commercial borders, and public-facing spaces that showcase native plants inspire neighbors, reduce community-scale water use, and create essential pollinator corridors in developed areas.

WHO SHOULD USE IT?

Use this guide if your property:

- Is located within an incorporated area of Blaine County — Ketchum, Hailey, Bellevue, or Sun Valley
- Has turf, ornamental plantings, or non-native ground cover you want to replace with native species
- Has been approved for a Grants for Grass Tier 3 award
- Offers a front yard, corner lot, or other publicly visible space for a demonstration landscape
- Is a commercial property, multifamily site, or community garden interested in native plant conversion

PURPOSE & OVERVIEW

Urban landscapes in Blaine County represent a significant and often overlooked opportunity for watershed conservation. Turf grass in cities and towns consumes large volumes of irrigation water, generates fertilizer and pesticide runoff, and provides minimal ecological function. Converting even a modest front yard to native, drought-tolerant species reduces water demand, improves stormwater infiltration, and creates critical pollinator habitat in developed areas where natural lands are fragmented and limited.

Urban native plantings also carry an outsized community value. A well-designed front yard with blooming penstemons, showy milkweed, and native grasses communicates — visually and tangibly — that conservation and beauty are not in conflict. These demonstration projects inspire neighbors, build community literacy around native plants, and multiply the program's impact beyond any single funded property.

This guide focuses on native plants best suited to Tier 3 Urban conditions: managed soils, smaller spaces, full to partial sun, and environments where aesthetic quality, manageability, and pollinator value are all priorities.

URBAN AREA OF WORK

What Makes Urban Sites Distinct

Urban properties present a specific set of conditions that require thoughtful plant selection. Soils are frequently compacted, amended, or poorly structured from past landscaping or construction. Space is often limited. Aesthetic expectations from neighbors and community context are higher. And the visual impact of the planting — positive or negative — is immediate and public.

The plants in this guide were selected to perform well in these conditions: tolerant of urban soils, visually compelling through the growing season, manageable at smaller scales, and genuinely supportive of the native insects and birds that urban green spaces too rarely serve.

ECOLOGICAL GOALS

- Reduce irrigation demand in incorporated areas where outdoor water use is high
- Improve stormwater infiltration and reduce runoff from compacted urban surfaces
- Support urban pollinators, beneficial insects, and migratory species in developed areas
- Reduce fertilizer and pesticide inputs that reach local drainages and the Big Wood
- Demonstrate that native plants are both ecologically effective and aesthetically compelling

BEFORE YOU PLANT

Remove Invasives First

Invasive ornamental species — including English ivy, bishop's weed, yellow archangel, and others — will aggressively outcompete native plantings. Remove them thoroughly before installing native plants.

Priority noxious weeds for upland sites in Blaine County:

- Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*)
- Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*)
- Non-native ornamental groundcovers — English ivy, periwinkle, bishop's weed
- Scotch broom (*Cytisus scoparius*)

Contact Idaho Invasive Species Council or the Blaine County Noxious Weed Department for identification and management guidance. Noxious weed control may be required by law on some properties.

Call 811 Before You Dig

Always call 811 to locate underground utilities before any digging or excavation.

Assess Your Site

- Sun exposure — map full sun (6+ hrs), partial sun, and shade. Many urban sites have significant shade from structures or existing trees.
- Soil conditions — urban soils are often compacted or amended. Lightly loosen planting areas; avoid excessive amendment that prevents roots from adapting to local conditions.
- Drainage — identify areas that hold water after rain. Standing water is problematic for natives.
- Visibility — identify which areas will have the most public impact. Prioritize maximum demonstration value.
- Existing irrigation — existing drip systems can often be adapted or repurposed. Plan to reduce irrigation over time as plants establish.

Timing

Fall planting is preferred — cooler temperatures and seasonal moisture help roots establish before summer. Early spring is a good alternative. Avoid planting in summer heat unless consistent drip irrigation is available.

PLANTING BEST PRACTICES

Site Preparation

- Remove all invasive weeds and non-native groundcovers before planting
- Sheet mulch with cardboard + 3" wood chips to suppress weeds without tilling
- Avoid deep tilling — it disturbs soil structure and brings weed seeds to the surface
- For turf removal, a sod cutter is efficient and minimizes soil disruption
- Lightly loosen compacted soil in planting holes; do not over-amend backfill

Planting Technique

- Dig hole as deep as the root ball and 1.5–2× as wide
- Gently loosen roots if compacted or circling
- Set the top of the root ball at or slightly above surrounding soil level
- Backfill with native soil — excessive amendment creates a “clay pot” effect
- Tamp lightly to remove air pockets, then water deeply
- Apply 2–3" of mulch after planting; keep mulch away from stems

Spacing & Design

- Plant in clusters of the same species — groups of 3–5 minimum for visual and ecological impact
- Layer plants by height: tall shrubs or small trees at back, medium perennials mid-border, groundcovers at edges
- Use clear edges — boulders, gravel bands, or mowing strips — to define planting areas from lawn or hardscape
- Anchor corners and focal points with structural shrubs like mock orange, maple, or skunkbush
- Sequence bloom times across the season for sustained color and pollinator value
- Connect plantings with neighbors if possible to create pollinator corridors

Establishment Watering

- Water deeply and infrequently to encourage deep root development
- First growing season: water every 7–10 days in summer; reduce in fall
- Second year: reduce to occasional deep watering
- After year 2–3: most urban natives require little or no supplemental irrigation
- Use drip irrigation where possible — efficient and reduces weed pressure
- Avoid overhead sprinklers once plants are established

Long-Term Care at a Glance

Year 1–2: Establish

- Water consistently per schedule; weed frequently in first season
- Replace any plants that fail to establish
- Replenish mulch as needed
- Monitor for invasive regrowth — especially in disturbed urban soils

Year 3+: Maintain

- Reduce or eliminate irrigation for established species
- Cut back perennials in late winter before new growth emerges
- Leave seed heads and stems through fall and winter for wildlife
- Allow natural reseeding of well-performing species

Ongoing Weed Management

Weeds are the most common challenge in new native plantings, particularly in urban soils that have been disturbed or amended over many years.

- Remove weeds before they go to seed — one plant can generate hundreds of seeds
- Focus on invasive species first; hand-pulling is preferred near native plantings
- Avoid broad herbicide use that can damage soil biology and harm beneficial insects
- As native plants mature and fill in, they will naturally suppress many weeds

Wildlife-Friendly Maintenance

Leave some stems, seed heads, and leaf litter in place through fall and winter — these provide critical overwintering habitat for native bees, beneficial insects, birds, and small mammals. Avoid removing all plant material at once.

Minimize pesticide use in urban native gardens. Many native bees nest in the soil beneath your plants — broad-spectrum applications are devastating to these communities.

12 KEYSTONE SPECIES FOR THE URBAN ZONE

Keystone species are native plants that support a disproportionately large share of the food web. They are the foundation of any successful urban planting — choose them first, then build supporting plant communities around them. All species below are confirmed native in the Big Wood watershed.

01. Lewis' Mock Orange *Philadelphus lewisii*

Role: Upright deciduous shrub, 5–10 ft; abundant fragrant white flowers in early summer; Idaho's state flower.

Wildlife value: Important early-summer nectar source for native bees; excellent nesting structure for songbirds.

Why keystone: Idaho's state flower and one of the most fragrant native shrubs — delivers outstanding pollinator value with a visual and sensory presence that anchors any urban garden.

Planting note: Tolerates part shade and a range of soils. Drought-tolerant once established. Prune after flowering to maintain shape. Excellent as a specimen or informal screen.



02. Rocky Mountain Maple *Acer glabrum*

Role: Multi-stem small tree or large shrub, 10–20 ft; winged seeds; brilliant yellow to orange-red fall color.

Wildlife value: Seeds consumed by birds and small mammals; excellent nesting structure; supports numerous caterpillar species.

Why keystone: The best small native tree for urban yards — shade-tolerant, manageable at maturity, visually striking in fall, and ecologically important year-round.

Planting note: Tolerates part to full shade and slightly moist soils. Highly adaptable to urban conditions. Can be multi-stemmed or trained as a single-leader small tree.



03. Skunkbush Sumac *Rhus trilobata*

Role: Dense shrub, 3–6 ft; small yellow spring flowers; bright red berries; brilliant orange-red fall color. Firewise rated.

Wildlife value: Berries eaten by birds through winter; excellent browse for deer; fire-resistant structure reduces fine fuel loads in WUI neighborhoods.

Why keystone: Tough, visually striking, and ecologically productive — delivers year-round wildlife value with minimal water or care in even the most challenging urban soils.

Planting note: Excellent Firewise selection. Spreads by root suckering on slopes and at corners. Tolerates shallow, rocky, or compacted soils. Very drought-tolerant.



04. Dwarf False Indigo *Amorpha nana*

Role: Compact shrub, 2–3 ft; dense dark purple flower spikes in early summer; fine-textured compound foliage.

Wildlife value: Nitrogen-fixing; important for native bees and bumblebees; larval host plant for several butterfly species.

Why keystone: One of the most bee-friendly compact shrubs available for urban gardens — nitrogen-fixing means it actively improves soil while supporting native insect communities.

Planting note: Well-suited to small spaces; tolerates poor, dry soils. Slow to establish in year one — patience is rewarded. Excellent in borders, medians, or low-maintenance beds.



05. Kinnikinnick *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*

Role: Trailing evergreen groundcover, 4–8 in; small pink urn-shaped flowers in spring; bright red berries through winter.

Wildlife value: Berries are critical winter food for birds including grouse and robins; early-season nectar source for queen bumblebees.

Why keystone: The best native groundcover for urban use — evergreen, drought-tolerant, deer-resistant, and highly valuable to wildlife year-round.

Planting note: Excellent on slopes, in rocky or well-drained soils, and under larger shrubs or trees. Slow to establish; avoid overwatering. Does not tolerate clay or standing water.



12 KEYSTONE SPECIES FOR THE URBAN ZONE

06. Blue Penstemon *Penstemon cyaneus*

Role: Upright perennial, 18–36 in; tall spikes of vibrant blue-violet flowers in late spring to early summer.

Wildlife value: Primary early-summer nectar source for native bees; strong hummingbird plant. Seeds consumed by small birds.

Why keystone: The signature urban native perennial of the Wood River Valley — fast to establish, dramatic in bloom, and critically important for early-season pollinators.

Planting note: Requires excellent drainage; will not survive clay or wet soils. Full sun. Short-lived (3–5 years) but reseeds readily where drainage is adequate. Plant in visible, well-drained spots.



07. Munro's Globemallow *Sphaeralcea munroana*

Role: Upright perennial, 18–30 in; clusters of orange to salmon-pink flowers through summer; gray-green lobed foliage.

Wildlife value: Strong midsummer pollinator plant; specialist bee genera (*Diadasia*, *Colletes*) are physiologically dependent on globemallow species.

Why keystone: Thrives in the harsh, compacted, dry soils of urban settings where most perennials fail — the toughest and most reliable midsummer pollinator plant for difficult sites.

Planting note: Extremely tolerant of disturbed, dry, compacted soils. Very drought-tolerant once established. Full sun. Do not over-amend planting hole.



08. Roundleaf Alumroot *Heuchera cylindrica*

Role: Mounding perennial, 12–18 in; tall wands of cream to pale yellow flowers; semi-evergreen scalloped foliage.

Wildlife value: Hummingbird and native bee plant in early summer. Foliage provides ground-level cover for beneficial insects.

Why keystone: One of the few native perennials that performs well in partial to full shade — filling the shaded urban niche where most native plants cannot compete.

Planting note: Excellent in partial shade under trees, on north-facing slopes, or beside structures. Prefers well-drained, slightly rocky soil. Tolerates dry shade once established.



09. Showy Milkweed *Asclepias speciosa*

Role: Upright perennial, 2–4 ft; large clusters of dusty pink flowers; striking horned seed pods; spreads by rhizome.

Wildlife value: Essential host plant for Monarch butterflies; exceptional diversity of insect visitors; seeds support birds through winter.

Why keystone: The most important pollinator plant you can grow in the Wood River Valley — the Monarch butterfly cannot complete its life cycle without it.

Planting note: Spreads by rhizomes; allow room to expand naturally in larger beds or contained beds with edging. Full sun. Slow to emerge in spring — mark it so you don't accidentally remove it.



10. Blanketflower *Gaillardia aristata*

Role: Short-lived perennial, 12–24 in; vivid orange-red and yellow daisy-like flowers from June through hard frost.

Wildlife value: Long-blooming nectar source extending well into fall when most other plants have finished; seeds support finches.

Why keystone: Extends the nectar season deeper into fall than almost any other native perennial — critical for migrating butterflies and late-season native bees.

Planting note: Drought-tolerant; prefers dry, well-drained soils. Short-lived but reseeds readily. Deadhead to extend bloom. Excellent in mass plantings or as a long-season color anchor.



12. Nettleleaf Giant Hyssop *Agastache urticifolia*

Role: Upright perennial, 2–4 ft; tall spikes of pink to lavender flowers in midsummer; aromatic foliage.

Wildlife value: Outstanding pollinator plant visited by hummingbirds, native bees, and butterflies. Seeds support birds.

Why keystone: One of the most pollinator-productive native perennials in the region — visited by an exceptional diversity of native bee species across a long midsummer bloom period.

Planting note: Adaptable to a range of well-drained soils. Tolerates part shade. Self-seeds moderately. Cut back after flowering to prevent excess reseeding if needed.



URBAN PLANTING DESIGN EXAMPLE

HAWTHORN (*Crataegus crus-galli inermis*)

BIRCHLEAF SPIREA (*Spiraea betulifolia*)

MOUNTAIN MAHOGANY (*Cercocarpus ledifolius*)

BLANKETFLOWER (*Gaillardia aristata*)
GLOBEFLOWER (*Sphaeralcea munroana*)
PRAIRIE JUNEGRASS (*Koeleria macrantha*)
SHRUBBY PENSTEMON (*Penstemon fruticosus*)

PINELEAF PENSTEMON (*Penstemon pinifolius*)
OREGON GRAPE (*Mahonia repens*)
WYETH'S BUCKWHEAT (*Eriogonum heracleoides*)

BLANKETFLOWER (*Gaillardia aristata*)
GLOBEFLOWER (*Sphaeralcea munroana*)
SHRUBBY PENSTEMON (*Penstemon fruticosus*)
WHITE SAGE (*Artemisia ludoviciana*)

HAWTHORN (*Crataegus crus-galli inermis*)

FOURWING SALTBUUSH (*Atriplex canescens*)

BASIN WILD RYE (*Leymus cinereus*)

AGGREGATE

BENCH

AGGREGATE

URBAN PLANTING EXAMPLE

POLLINATOR GARDEN FOR THE URBAN ZONE

Even on a small city lot, a dedicated pollinator zone — as little as 50–150 square feet — can meaningfully support native bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. Urban pollinator gardens are highly visible and inspire neighbors. Use the plants below to create a continuous bloom sequence from early spring through late fall.

SPRING BLOOM (APRIL – MAY)

Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)

Small pink urn-shaped flowers in early spring provide nectar for emerging queen bumblebees. Evergreen year-round, red berries through winter. Excellent as a low border or groundcover.

Lewis' Mock Orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*)

Idaho's state flower — masses of fragrant white blooms in late spring to early summer. A beloved nectar plant for native bees and a standout specimen in any urban garden.

MIDSUMMER BLOOM (JULY – AUGUST)

Showy Milkweed (*Asclepias speciosa*)

Clusters of dusty pink flowers in midsummer. The essential host plant for Monarch butterflies — the Monarch cannot complete its life cycle without it. Supports an exceptional diversity of insects and seed-eating birds.

Munro's Globemallow (*Sphaeralcea munroana*)

Orange to salmon-pink flowers through midsummer. The toughest and most reliable midsummer pollinator plant for difficult urban soils. Specialist bees (*Diadasia* spp.) cannot complete their life cycle without it.

Nettleleaf Giant Hyssop (*Agastache urticifolia*)

Tall lavender-pink spikes in midsummer. Exceptional pollinator plant visited by hummingbirds, native bees, and butterflies. Grows in full sun to part shade — adaptable to a wide range of urban settings.

EARLY SUMMER BLOOM (JUNE – JULY)

Blue Penstemon (*Penstemon cyaneus*)

Dramatic blue-violet flower spikes in late spring to early summer. A primary nectar plant for native bees and a reliable hummingbird magnet. The signature spring perennial for urban native gardens in the Wood River Valley.

Roundleaf Alumroot (*Heuchera cylindrica*)

Cream to pale yellow flower wands in early summer with semi-evergreen foliage. One of the few native perennials that performs well in partial shade — ideal under trees or beside north-facing structures.

EARLY SUMMER BLOOM (JUNE – JULY)

Blanketflower (*Gaillardia aristata*)

Vivid orange-red and yellow flowers from June through frost — the longest bloom season of any native perennial in this guide. Critical for migrating butterflies and late-season bees when most plants have finished.

Lewis' Flax (*Linum lewisii*)

Sky-blue flowers through the hottest part of summer, providing consistent nectar when heat limits other blooms. Reseeds readily where drainage is good. Pair with penstemon and globemallow for a long-season blue-orange combination.

Design Tip

Plant pollinator species in clusters of 5–7 or more. A single showy milkweed is invisible; a patch of five is a Monarch waystation, a neighborhood landmark, and a community conversation starter

Resources & Support

Apply for a Grants for Grass Award

projectbigwood.org/apply

Invasive Species of Idaho

idahoinvasives.org

Blaine County Noxious Weed Department

<https://www.blainecountyid.gov/225/Noxious-Weeds>

Idaho Native Plant Society

idahonativeplants.org

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Local Native Plant Nurseries

Webb Landscape & Nursery – Bellevue, ID · webbland.com

North Fork Native Plants – Rexburg, ID ·

northforknativeplants.com

Draggin' Wing High Desert Nursery – Boise, ID ·

waterthriftyplants.com

Great Bear Native Plants – Corvallis, MT ·

greatbearnativeplants.com

Questions about your project?

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