

A Year in the Garden

Managing the Brightside Demonstration Garden — a month-by-month guide for native plantings

OUR GOALS

- Support local wildlife and biodiversity
- Showcase native plants for urban & suburban yards
- Show that native plantings can be low-work & sustainable
- Create a peaceful, welcoming space for people
- Foster a connection between people and nature



Work with nature
and
Welcome people in

The First Year

TASK	WHAT TO DO IN YEAR 1
Watering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Water all plants deeply right after planting• Perennials & grasses: Water every other day for the first week, weekly for the first month, then monthly through the rest of the first growing season.• Trees and shrubs: 1–2 inches per week through the entire first growing season.• Water deeply and slowly — encourage roots to grow deep• Use a rain gauge at soil level to measure 1 inch per session. Rain counts toward the total.• Avoid shallow, frequent watering — it grows weak, surface-level roots.
Weeding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitor for weeds from March through November.• Hand-pull perennial weeds (bindweed, Bermuda grass, nutsedge) with a soil knife — remove as much root as possible.• Cut or pull annual weeds (crabgrass, henbit, spotted spurge) before they set seed.• Minimize soil disturbance — digging brings dormant weed seeds to the surface.• Expect to spend the most time weeding in Year 1. It gets dramatically easier by Year 3 as plants fill in.
Mulching	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Apply a 2-inch layer of shredded wood mulch between (not touching) plants.• Reapply on any bare spots that appear during the year.• Never exceed 3 inches — thick mulch smothers roots and prevents water from reaching them.• Never pile mulch against the trunks of trees or shrubs (no “mulch volcanoes”).• As plants mature and fill in, they take over as the living ground cover and you’ll need less mulch.
Editing & replacing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expect some plants to die — even with perfect care, a 1–2% loss in Year 1 is normal.• Best windows for adding replacements: March–May and September–October.
Pruning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leave most pruning alone in Year 1 — let new plants put their energy into root growth.• Remove only broken, damaged, or clearly dead branches as you see them.• Hold off on the “spring haircut” (cutting back tall perennials in late April) until Year 2 or later.
What NOT to do	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No pesticides. Native plantings depend on beneficial insects.• No synthetic fertilizer. Native plants are adapted to regional soils and rarely need it.• Don’t fuss over imperfect-looking plants — many natives look rough their first year while they put energy into roots.• Don’t give up if you don’t see lush growth in Year 1. The saying is: first year sleep, second year creep, third year leap.

AFTER YEAR 1

By Year 2, the watering, weeding, and mulching demands drop significantly. Perennials and grasses should be largely self-sufficient outside of severe drought. Trees and shrubs still benefit from supplemental watering (1–2 inches per week) during dry stretches in Years 2–3 while their root systems continue to develop. By Year 3, most native plantings have reached maturity — filling in, supporting wildlife, and requiring far less hands-on work.

Ongoing Management

WHEN	TASKS
Year-round	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pick up trash • Keep edges crisp and well-defined where beds meet lawn or paths. • Trim plants that spill onto paths or block sight lines. • Sweep or blow loose mulch and clippings off walkways. • Watch for invasive species (bush honeysuckle, sweet autumn clematis, tree-of-heaven seedlings) and remove them promptly. • Apply shredded wood mulch (no more than 2 inches) only to bare spots — never piled against trunks.
Late March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spring cutback: cut perennials and grasses down to 8–10 inches once temperatures stay in the 50s (or when serviceberries bloom). • Chop the trimmings into small pieces and leave them in place as natural mulch. • Don't let thick mats of leaves and debris smother plant crowns — remove if needed.
April – May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best time for adding new plants. Water them in and check every other day for the first week. • Try a “spring haircut” on tall, late-blooming perennials: cut them back by one-third to one-half in late April to encourage bushier growth and prevent flopping. • Weed every 1–3 weeks, focusing on perennial weeds while they are small.
June – August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water during drought: 1 inch per week for new plants; established plants only when stressed. • Edit as needed — thin or remove plants that are crowding neighbors. • Keep edges crisp where beds meet lawn or paths. • Weeding should be minimal in established beds.
September – October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second-best window for adding new plants. • Take notes on what worked and what didn't — what flopped, what got crowded out, what gaps need filling. • Clear leaf litter and debris from paths or where it has piled up • Leaves that fall naturally into beds can stay; don't add more on top.
November – January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave standing stems and seed heads in place through winter for wildlife habitat, crown insulation, and visual interest. • Do not cut back until late March. • Make plans for the coming year — order plants, sketch ideas, take stock.
Late Feb – Early March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prune trees and shrubs while still dormant. • Remove no more than 25% of the canopy at one time. • Focus on crossing, damaged, or inward-growing branches. • This is the main window for woody plant pruning.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- **Intentionality.** Crisp edges, clear paths, no trash, and thoughtful plant placement signal that the garden is cared for. These small acts of intentionality are what let a wilder native planting feel welcoming rather than neglected.
- **Less mulch over time.** Think of wood mulch as a temporary tool, not a permanent feature. Apply no more than 2 inches, never against trunks. Chopped trimmings and fallen leaves work just as well — and as plants fill in, they become the living ground cover.
- **No pesticides. No synthetic fertilizer.** Native plantings depend on beneficial insects and soil biology. These inputs undermine the ecological function you're trying to build.
- **Editing is gardening.** Thin aggressive spreaders, relocate plants that aren't thriving, and replace what dies. A native garden is a living community that needs ongoing thoughtful adjustment, not just maintenance.
- **Watch and learn.** Walking the garden regularly is very valuable. You'll notice patterns long before they become problems.