

# Explore Wyoming's native flora on a B&B plant walk

In 2012, natural resource experts from the Barnyards & Backyards team had an idea. They envisioned a series of plant walks in which community members could learn more about native plant identification, local habitats, and intrusive weeds.

For more than a decade now, groups of plant enthusiasts have gathered each summer to chat, laugh, and learn about the plants of Albany County. Originally led by the University of Wyoming Extension and Laramie River Conservation District, the Barnyards & Backyards plant walks have expanded as more organizations have joined the team.

Current partners include UW Extension, the UW Biodiversity Institute, US Forest Service, Laramie Rivers Conservation District, and the Rocky Mountain Herbarium. Together, they organize at least two native plant walks each growing season. Locations vary, offering participants the chance to explore a wide variety of Wyoming flora.

## Different places, different plants

“During the walk participants learn from the instructor about how to identify various plants, the role these plants serve in the ecosystem, and other interesting facts,” says Brian Sebade, a plant walk leader and former UW Extension educator. “Participants have the chance to physically touch the plants and learn through a hands-on activity.”

The walks typically start with an overview of the area in a large group setting. Participants then split into smaller groups, so everyone has the opportunity to engage with experts. Each group walks around the

area and learns about the native grasses, shrubs, wildflowers, and weeds they encounter.

For example, in June 2023, plant walk participants explored UW's McGuire Ranch. The walk took place in a typical Albany County rangeland setting, full of sagebrush, native grasses, blooming wildflowers, and a few weedy plants.

The July walk took place in the Medicine Bow Mountains. This walk was a little different because the coordinators picked an uncommon ecosystem in Wyoming—a fen. Fens consist of groundwater-fed areas where plant matter decomposes slowly due to the lack of oxygen. This walk focused on several types of moss (including sphagnum) and other native plants commonly found in fens.

## Valuable lessons

During plant walks, participants learn how to identify native plants and discuss how these species might fit into management practices. Plant walks “give us



Derek Scasta (left) and Mike Smith on a B&B plant walk at the McGuire Ranch, summer 2023. Photo by Makenna McGraw.

an opportunity to demonstrate the diversity of the landscape and management of those landscapes,” says Martin Curry, district manager of the Laramie Rivers Conservation District.

Developing basic plant identification skills can be useful for property owners, land managers, hikers, and plant enthusiasts alike. For example, in 2023, plant walk participants learned how to identify meadow death camas at the McGuire Ranch and mountain death camas in a fen near Fox Park. Both species look similar to wild onions and can be mistaken for one another. Learning how to tell them apart can help participants recognize what they’re looking at during a hike, manage risk with grazing livestock, and avoid dangerous mistakes when foraging for edible plants.

## Resources to take home

With all the valuable information they receive on walks, participants may wonder how they’ll possibly retain it all. For each walk, the coordinators provide two resources. During the walk, they give out a plant list



Lewis flax (*Linum lewisii*) at the McGuire Ranch, identified on a native plant walk in summer 2023. Makenna McGraw.

with the names of all the plants encountered on the walk. After the walk, participants receive a digital “study guide” with photos of each plant. Both resources are intended to help participants retain information and share their knowledge with others.

## Want to learn more?

If you’re interested in identifying or growing native plants in Wyoming, check out the resources below or contact a local UW Extension office.

### Online resources

- Barnyards & Backyards Native Plants page: <https://bit.ly/BBNativePlants> (contains links to a wide array of resources, including relevant UW Extension publications)
- *Plants with Altitude: Regionally Native Plants for Wyoming Gardens*, UW Extension: <https://bit.ly/wy-native-plants>

### Books

- *Wildflowers of Wyoming, Second Edition (2015)* by Diantha States and Jack States
- *Wildflowers of the Rocky Mountain Region*, Denver Botanic Gardens
- *A Field Guide to Wyoming Grasses* by Quentin D. Skinner
- *Vascular Plants of Wyoming* by Robert D. Dorn

## Making connections

On top of all of that, the plant walk community is a welcoming group. Plant walks are an opportunity to make connections with people as well as plants. The leaders of the plant walks love to help folks learn and grow.

“During the plant walk, I get to hang out with people who share my interest in native plants,” says Dorothy Tuthill, former associate director and education coordinator of the UW Biodiversity Institute. “I learn from nearly all of them. It’s a special group of people who choose to spend their time poking at native plants!”

Next time you visit Albany County, consider putting a Barnyards & Backyards plant walk on your agenda. To learn more about native plants or upcoming walks, visit [barnyardsandbackyards.com](http://barnyardsandbackyards.com), sign up for our email listserv, or follow us on Facebook.

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**Makenna McGraw** interned with Barnyards & Backyards in summer 2023. She dreams of running a cattle ranch in Wyoming as a first-generation rancher.

## Featured Plant Walk: The UW McGuire Ranch

In June 2023, B&B hosted a plant walk at UW's McGuire Ranch. The high desert ranch, located outside Laramie, boasts a vast expanse of sagebrush and native cool-season grasses.

The 5,479-acre property, which was purchased by the university in 1992, is managed by the Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station and UW College of Agriculture, Life Sciences and Natural Resources.

Before the university purchased the ranch, it was used for a commercial cattle outfit and, for a brief time, farming. Currently, UW researchers are working on a grazing project assessing carbon footprint, vegetation, and wildlife as part of a five-year, multi-state study. Recent infrastructure updates include the installation of a new well, 12 miles of fence line, soil water sensors, infrared remote game cameras, and towers that estimate carbon dioxide flow.



### Looking for local events?

- **Plant walks & workshops:** Advertised on B&B Facebook page, <https://bit.ly/barnyard-backyard-fb>
- **Wyoming Native Plant Society:** [www.wynps.org](http://www.wynps.org)
- **Wyoming Resource Education Days** (for junior high and high school students): [www.wyomingrangelands.org/wyred1](http://www.wyomingrangelands.org/wyred1)
- **Wyoming BioBlitz:** <https://bit.ly/wy-bio-blitz>

Identifying native range plants at the McGuire Ranch on a B&B plant walk, summer 2023. Photo by Makenna McGraw.