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Colorado Senate Bill 24-005 Grasses and Plants Guide

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Introduction

Colorado Senate Bill 24-005 (SB5) prohibits turf in nonfunctional areas of new and redeveloped commercial, industrial and institutional (CII) properties, and homeowner association (HOA) common area properties¹ referred to as “applicable properties,” with an implementation date of January 1, 2026. Additionally, street rights-of-way, parking lots, medians, and transportation corridors are identified as specific examples of nonfunctional areas.

The intention of the bill is that cool season, high water use turf is not installed on applicable properties in areas where lower water use grasses and/or **water-wise landscaping** would serve just as well without impacting community use of the area. Additionally, SB5 prohibits invasive plant species throughout new and redeveloped applicable properties. **SB5 does not apply to single-family and similar residential properties.**

This guide is intended to help clarify what grasses and plants can and can't be planted in compliance with SB5. Communities may need to create or amend existing development review processes to request landscaping plans that demonstrate the type and location of grasses and plants.

Colorado House Bill 25-1113

Colorado House Bill 25-1113 (HB1113) adds multifamily properties with more than 12 units to the list of applicable properties, with a later implementation date of January 1, 2028. SB5 is encompassed in C.R.S. Section 37-99, which will be updated to reflect HB1113 changes and additions.

Nonfunctional Turf and Grasses for Nonfunctional Areas

SB5 states “Turf” has the meaning set forth in [Colorado Revised Statutes (C.R.S.)] Section 37-60-135 (2)(i), which is defined as a continuous plant coverage consisting of non-native grasses or grasses that have not been hybridized for arid conditions and which, when regularly mowed, form a dense growth of leaf blades and roots.

Cool season turf grasses, which are not native or climate adapted to Colorado, require more water to stay green and healthy. SB5 prohibits the use of cool season grasses, including mixes/blends and hybrids, in nonfunctional areas of properties.

¹ SB24-005 also required the state – not communities – to implement SB5 for state facilities by an earlier January 1, 2025, date, which is not the focus of this guide.

SB5 states that warm season native and climate adapted grasses that require significantly less water can be used in nonfunctional areas along with a range of plants, shrubs, and trees that are native or adapted to Colorado's climate. **Reminder: Any grass may be used in functional areas of CII and HOA common area properties that are regularly used for civic, community, or recreational purposes.** See the [Key Considerations Guide](#) for functional and nonfunctional definitions.

Grass and Turf

The grass family is one of the largest plant families on Earth and different grasses serve as human food, animal fodder, wildlife shelter, ground cover, lawns, and playing fields among many other functions. Turf is defined in C.R.S. Section 37-60-135 (2)(i) and turfgrasses tend to be dense, pleasing to the touch, and comfortable to recreate on. Traditional turfgrasses, like Kentucky bluegrass, are not native to Colorado and require a lot more water than native grasses. SB5 limits turf where active recreation is not occurring and where other water-wise grasses or plants are appropriate as they will not affect area use. Some of these grasses may have characteristics similar to turf, and others may not — growing taller, preferring not to be mowed as short as turf, being less dense, and having different texture and color, among other differences.

Hybridized Grasses

It is important to note that plants and grasses can be hybridized for many reasons. In fact, the vast majority of turf grasses on the market today are hybrids. **Just because grass is a hybrid does not mean it is adapted to arid conditions and allowable in nonfunctional areas.**

While not specified in SB5, communities may identify grasses that have been “hybridized for arid conditions” as those with irrigation water needs — to stay healthy and not go dormant — that are comparable to native grasses. It is important to note that drought or heat tolerant grasses are not necessarily low water use. Being tolerant may mean grasses can go dormant in hot and dry conditions and recover but still require moderate to high levels of irrigation to stay a vibrant green.

Communities can require developers to provide information on the irrigation needs of grasses proposed for use in nonfunctional areas. Communities can also refer to local or regional data for the irrigation needs of specific grasses, and local scientific or extension resources can be helpful. For example, Kentucky bluegrass along Colorado's Front Range needs approximately 24–30 inches of irrigation water, while the grasses included in the [Colorado Native Grass Guide](#) require only 8-12 inches (60-67% less water). Each community can establish a threshold that best meets their needs. Consider requiring that grasses in nonfunctional areas meet a threshold of needing 60% less irrigation water than Kentucky bluegrass.

Nonfunctional Area Grasses Overview

The number of grass species and varieties are large, and new options are introduced to the market all the time. Rather than attempting to categorize the many grass species, varieties, blends, and brands, this guide identifies grasses commonly used for turf, and whether they are allowable in nonfunctional areas under SB5 requirements.

Selecting the right grass option for a landscaped area is complex and should include considerations such as irrigation needs, foot traffic tolerance, appearance, maintenance requirements, shade tolerance, and salt tolerance. Additionally, communities should be aware that water-wise grasses will often not look like, or have the same maintenance needs, as traditional high water-use cool season grasses. The **Colorado Native Grass Guide** provides valuable guidance for selecting, installing and maintaining native, Colorado climate adapted, and water-wise species.

Turf and other Grasses in CII and HOA Common Area Property Nonfunctional Areas^{2,3}

Not Allowed: High Irrigation Need		Allowed: Low/No Irrigation Need Use	
Cool season non-native turf grasses		Native, warm season and climate adapted grasses	
Common examples include, but are not limited to:		Common examples include, ⁴ but are not limited to:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kentucky bluegrass, including blends and hybrids• Tall fescue• Fine fescue• Perennial ryegrass• Texas hybrid bluegrass• Hybrids of the species above, including those selected for “drought” or “heat” tolerance		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Buffalograss• Blue grama• Buffalograss/blue grama grass mixture• Native shortgrass prairie mixture⁵• Cold-hardy bermudagrass• Other native and low water use grasses, including mixes	

² Any of the grasses listed here may be used in functional areas regularly used for civic, community, or recreational purposes.

³ Irrigation needs are post-establishment irrigation.

⁴ The Colorado Native Grass Guide was used to inform this list.

⁵ Often includes grasses like buffalograss, blue grama, sideoats grama, western wheatgrass, and green needle.

Resources for Water-Wise Plants and Prohibited Invasive Plants

This section provides guidance for:

- Water-wise plants that may serve as alternatives to nonfunctional turf in nonfunctional areas, and;
- Prohibited plant species that must be avoided.

Water-Wise Plants

SB5 supports the use of water-wise landscaping in nonfunctional turf areas. Colorado's statutory definition of "water-wise landscaping" (C.R.S. 37-60-135(2)) emphasizes the use of plants that require lower supplemental water, such as native and drought-tolerant plants, and specifies that landscaping is intended to be functional and attractive.

Many resources regarding plant materials exist, with new resources regularly being developed and updates made to existing resources. The following is a selection of Colorado-specific resources that may be helpful to consider, but it is not meant to be exhaustive. Local gardens and extension offices often have additional resources available.

Colorado Native Plant Society Low-water Native Plants by Region

Colorado Native Plant Society's website has many resources, including downloadable guides on native low water plants for Colorado gardens for the following areas:

- **Front Range & Foothills**
- **Western Slope – Below 7,000'**
- **Mountains 7,500' and Above**
- **Southeastern Colorado**
- **Prairie and Plains**

Colorado State Extension Plant Guides

Colorado State Extension has developed factsheets that include plant lists, several that are specific to mountain communities. List contents vary, but include information like plant irrigation water needs, size, color, and maximum elevation, among other details.

- **Native Shrubs for Colorado Landscapes**
- **Native Herbaceous Perennials for Colorado Landscapes**
- **Wildflowers for Colorado**
- **Flowers for Mountain Communities**
- **Trees and Shrubs for Mountain Communities**
- **Groundcovers and Rock Garden Plants for Mountain Communities**

Colorado Plant Database

The Colorado Plant Database can be filtered to search for native plants and by locations from around the state. It was created and is maintained by the staff of **Colorado State Extension's Native Plant Master Program**.

Glenwood Springs Landscaping Guide

Glenwood Springs does not have an approved plant list, but this guide provides residents and others with a list of locally appropriate plants that can survive in the Glenwood Springs climate.

Town of Castle Rock 2025 Approved Plant List

Castle Rock has an approved plant list of trees, shrubs, perennial plants (including grasses, and annual plants). The list is a selection of water-wise native and regionally adapted plants organized by the plant type with its hydrozone, size, exposure, and fire rating information for each species.

Colorado Springs Utilities 2023 Landscape Policy Manual, Including Plant List

Appendix A of the manual is a list of approved plants selected for Colorado Springs geographic location that are intended to be water efficient, horticulturally sustainable, and have balanced diversity. Colorado Springs requires that a minimum of 70% of plants in CII property landscape plans come from this list, which is being updated in 2025.

City of Westminster's List of Recommended and Prohibited Plants (November 2024)

A spreadsheet file that includes trees, shrubs, lawn grasses, and native plants. Plant information includes hydrozone, sun tolerance, mature height and width, and if it is a regional native plant. The file also includes a list of prohibited plants.

Northern Water's Plant List

The list includes a variety of plants that are recommended because they grow well in the northern Colorado region. This list includes plant details such as mature height and width, flowering season, sun requirements, water needs, and hardiness zone, among other information. Northern Water also has a **Plant List for Hot & Dry Street Strips**, which is the narrow green space between streets and sidewalks that can be found in many neighborhoods and can be challenging to maintain.

Plant Select

Plant Select is a nonprofit and brand of plants designed to thrive in the High Plains and intermountain regions with less water. The website includes lists of plants and a search function to find the right plant for the right place.

Prohibited Plants

In addition to limiting nonfunctional turf and artificial turf, SB5 prohibits the planting of invasive plant species.

SB5 defines invasive plant species (C.R.S. 37-60-135(2)(e)) as plants that are not native to the state and that:

- Are introduced into the state accidentally or intentionally;
- Have no natural competitors or predators in the state because the state is outside of their competitors' or predators' range; and
- Have harmful effects on the state's environment or economy or both.

While not specified in SB5, invasive plant species are synonymous with noxious weeds. Additionally, while lists of invasive plant species are not readily available, noxious weeds are regulated through Colorado's Noxious Weed Act (C.R.S. 35-5.5). When incorporating SB5 invasive plant prohibitions into code, it may be helpful to use both the terms "noxious weeds" and "invasive plant species" for clarity.

The **Colorado Noxious Weed Act** (C.R.S. 35-5.5) defines noxious weeds as an alien plant or parts of an alien plant that have been designated by rule as being noxious or has been declared a noxious weed by a local advisory board, and meets one or more of the following criteria:

- Aggressively invades or is detrimental to economic crops or native plant communities;
- Is poisonous to livestock;
- Is a carrier of detrimental insects, diseases, or parasites;
- The direct or indirect effect of the presence of this plant is detrimental to the environmentally sound management of natural or agricultural ecosystems.

Under the act, each county in Colorado is required to have a weed management plan that includes lists of noxious weeds being regulated (see **County Weed Programs**). Statewide lists of noxious weeds are provided on the **Colorado Department of Agriculture Noxious Weeds website**. Noxious weeds should not be available for sale and are already regulated under Colorado law. These lists can serve to identify plant species prohibited under SB5.

Additional information can be found on the **Colorado Weed Management Association's Weed Information website**.

Implementation Considerations

There are many approaches communities may consider to align with SB5 requirements. A community's existing regulatory landscape, staff capacity, and staff expertise will likely inform which approach is taken. Developing high-level code requirements that are consistent with SB5, and that refer to more detailed landscape policy guidance materials or administrative documents that live outside of code, can provide useful flexibility. Policy guidance materials that provide detailed landscaping requirements, including lists of grasses that can and can't be

used in nonfunctional areas, and lists of approved and/or prohibited plants, can be updated more easily and frequently than code. **It is important to consider community goals, geography, and climate in selecting appropriate grasses and plant lists, which can vary by community.**

Additionally, designers aiming to choose the right plant for the right location should also consider plant irrigation needs, soil preference, height, width, color, pollinator benefits, shade tolerance, salt tolerance, and climate zone, among other things. Some plant lists provide these additional details to assist in plant selection. For additional flexibility, communities may want to allow for custom grass mixes and/or plants not on approved plant lists to be submitted for approval without requiring a variance. For more information, see the [**SB5 Key Considerations Guide**](#) and the [**Compliant Code Matrix**](#).