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**CONTACT:** Morgan Valliant, Conservation Lands Manager

**PHONE:** 552-6263 office; 214-2692 cell

**E-MAIL:** [mvalliant@ci.missoula.mt.us](mailto:mvalliant@ci.missoula.mt.us)

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## NATIVE GRASSES TAKE ROOT

### City delays mowing natural areas to encourage native grass growth

Missoula's rainy spring has made it a banner year for Montana's native wildflowers and grasses, and the City of Missoula is delaying mowing some urban natural areas to give the grasses time to seed.

"We're not just managing weeds, we are managing desirable plant communities," said Morgan Valliant, Conservation Lands Manager for the City of Missoula.

The wet weather makes native grasses and wildflowers create more seeds, giving them a needed edge over invasive species. Plentiful seeds give grasses a chance to crowd out weeds, such as leafy spurge. However, if they are mowed too soon, grasses won't have time to drop their seeds, allowing invasive weeds to take over.

Many invasive species, like knapweed, are very tolerant of mowing and will sprout back and flower even after being cut back. If they are mowed later in the season, while they are flowering, they can be prevented from seeding.

"We are mandated by the State of Montana to control noxious weeds," said Valliant. "The best way to do that is to encourage the native plants and wildflowers that we do want—and those native plants will crowd out noxious weeds."

"Native plant communities provide habitat for wildlife, are more attractive and more ecologically diverse than infestations of noxious weeds," Valliant said. "In parks like the Children's Fish Pond on Bancroft Street, those native prairie areas provide a great outdoor classroom for local students."

In addition, native plants don't spread as rapidly as noxious weeds, so they don't invade gardens or irrigated public spaces.

City Council representative Marilyn Marler, who is also the University of Montana's Natural Areas Specialist, values native grasses not only for the ecological benefits, but also for their beauty.

“These are grasses that don’t grow everywhere in the world but only in specific regions,” said Marler. “They are beautiful. It’s nice to walk through them when the wind blows through them. It’s a special kind of plant community we should foster, rather than making every park into turf grass.”

City-owned parcels being managed to increase native grasses and wildflowers include Ninpata, Takima, Cohossett, Highland, Hemayagan, Children’s Fish Pond on Bancroft and Perry Park in the South Hills, Hamilton, Khanabad, Syringa and Stanley in the Rattlesnake, Hellgate and Ben Hughes along the Clark Fork in East Missoula, and various locations at Fort Missoula and certain City rights-of-way.

For more information about Parks and Recreation’s mowing program, phone the Park Operations Division at 552-6277. Missoulians who want to know more about their native plants can visit the native plant garden at Fort Missoula or find more information about native plants on the Montana Natural History Center website at [www.montanaturalist.org](http://www.montanaturalist.org).

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Daniel Viehland, Communications Office intern, 552-6010, [dviehland@ci.missoula.mt.us](mailto:dviehland@ci.missoula.mt.us)