

# Streamside Landscaping

## Common Issues

Many landowners value the appearance of their riverfront and want easy access to the water. Sometimes, this leads to a preference for “clean” banks, where large wood, shrubs, or tall grasses are removed. While this may create a tidy look, easier access, or better views, it can unintentionally compromise river health by removing the very features that stabilize banks, provide shade, and create habitat. Over time, simplified riverbanks can become more prone to erosion, higher water temperatures, and a loss of fish and wildlife.

## Questions to Consider

- Am I removing large wood or natural materials from the stream channel or banks to make my property look “clean?”
- Does my landscaping support native riparian vegetation, or have I converted the bank to lawn or non-native plants?
- Is fertilizer being used on streamside landscaping?
- If I want river views or access, can I achieve this while keeping most of the riparian forest intact?
- Are there ways to design my property so that it benefits both people and wildlife?

## Principles of River Health

### Aquatic and Terrestrial Wildlife Depend on the River and Floodplain

River and riparian health should be improved where possible to support both water- and land-based wildlife populations in the Yampa Valley. Although Colorado's riparian zones comprise only 2 percent of its land area, more than 80 percent of wildlife species depend on riparian areas for at least part of their life cycle.

### Rivers are Naturally “Messy”



*Streamside landscaping can significantly alter the riparian corridor | Photo by Roddy Beall, Zenobia Consultants*

Large wood, fallen trees, and dense vegetation may not always look tidy, but these components are critical for a healthy stream system. Wood slows the flow of water, creates pools and riffles, fosters a complex stream channel, and provides cover for fish and wildlife. Riparian plants shade the river, filter runoff, and stabilize banks. Simplifying

a riverbank to make it look orderly often removes these important elements, reducing habitat and making the river more vulnerable to erosion. Maintaining a naturally intact riparian buffer can still allow for views, trails, or sitting areas while supporting river function.

## Recommended Practices or Actions

Streamside landscaping choices play an important role in maintaining healthy rivers, stable banks, and diverse wildlife habitat. This section highlights approaches that emphasize working with natural riparian vegetation, including keeping existing riparian forests intact, selectively creating view corridors, retaining large wood and standing dead trees where safe, and restoring native buffers in place of manicured lawns to support a more natural and resilient riverscape.

### Leave Riparian Forest in Place

Avoid the temptation to cut down or remove willows, cottonwoods, alders, and native grasses to create a manicured interaction with the stream edge. Preserve native vegetation with at least a 30-foot buffer width (preferably a 60-foot buffer width or more).

## Create View Corridors

If river views or access are important, selectively clear small areas for sightlines or walking paths while keeping most of the riparian forest intact. Strategically remove as little vegetation as possible.

## Leave Large Fallen Wood and Standing Dead Trees

Instead of removing logs or branches from the river corridor, consider leaving them in place or repositioning them safely if necessary. Large wood helps slow water, reduce erosion, and build diverse fish habitat. In addition, retain standing snags (dead trees) where it is safe to do so. They provide critical nesting and perching sites for birds and other wildlife.

## Restore Native Riparian Buffers and Foster an Aesthetic Focused on Landscaping to Maximize Wildlife Habitat

Where riparian forest has been removed, replace lawn or ornamental landscaping near the river with native shrubs, trees, and grasses along the streamside. These provide food and shelter for birds, pollinators, and mammals while improving bank stability and water quality.



*Instead of a manicured estate, consider the beauty of a natural, wild riverscape | Photos by Alexander Pope (left) and Mark Abusamra (right)*

## Benefits of Implementing Recommended Practices

- Increased property value and beauty as a result of maintaining a natural, attractive river corridor
- More wildlife viewing opportunities, including birds, fish, and pollinators
- Increased fishery health and better fishing
- Reduced erosion and flooding risk thanks to stronger, deeper-rooted vegetation
- Lower maintenance costs compared to lawns or non-native landscaping

## Reference and Resource Materials

The Coalition for the Poudre River Watershed's [“Wood is Good: The Vital Role of Wood in River Health” fact sheet](#) presents the role and benefits of the presence of wood in Colorado streams and rivers.

Professor Ellen Wohl of CSU published an essay called [“Messy Rivers are Healthy Rivers”](#) about the benefits of physical complexity in a river corridor.

Western Resilience Center created a [Guide to Yampascaping](#) that provides useful information and resources on the process of transforming a yard or other piece of land into one that is more appropriate to the Yampa Valley region.