BEAUTIFYING A TRAFFIC MEADIAN WITH NATIVE PLANTS

A traffic median is a strip of turf grass surrounded by a curb that divides two lanes of a street often leading into a neighborhood. Sometimes trees have been planted in the median. Introducing additional and showier plants into the median will make the neighborhood more welcoming and to residents and visitors. The plants suggested here will also provide ecological benefits, above all by attracting pollinators and feeding birds.

Traffic medians are of various width. Those between 10 and 20 feet, which seem typical, should accommodate some shrubs for winter structure. St. John’s Wort, New Jersey Tea or a small Ninebark would work well, or perhaps a spreading taxus (not native) or a small round arborvitae if evergreen is desired. If there are no trees in the median, one might consider planting some, either shade trees if there is room or small trees. However, too much shade in a median is not a good thing, because the visual impact of the herbaceous planting will depend on the number of sun-loving species that can be introduced. In laying out the beds, attention should be paid to minimizing the edges between the grass and the planting beds. Those edges add to the maintenance work.

The herbaceous plants (perennial flowers and grasses) need to be planted in drifts, that is in multiples of 7 or more to make the strong visual impact that is absolutely essential for the median (most people will see the plants only while driving by). Plants that are natural spreaders, like the creeping phloxes, mints, monardas and black-eyed susans, can be planted singly. Some can be repeated (creeping phlox black-eyed susans, aromatic aster), others shouldn’t be.

Plants should be arranged in such a way that the lower ones are along the edges and higher ones toward the middle. Except for trees, nothing should grow higher than 3-4 feet to keep the traffic engineer happy. Some 2 foot plants can, for a time, spill a bit over the curb, which would give the median pizzazz, but too much of that for too long will raise safety concerns, especially if the traffic lanes are not very wide.

If people cut across the median to reach bus stops and stores, a path needs to be built. Otherwise they will walk through the plantings. The path should probably be made of natural stone or some other material that remains visible all through the year.

Some large ornamental boulders can add great interest to the median, but both the boulders and placing them will cost some money. Still, it’s worth trying to raise that money.

The plant list below names possible plants for medians, but here are some that are particularly useful:

* Creeping phlox, both lavender and hot pink, along the edges for spring color
* Eastern bluestar and Arkansas bluestar for dependable foliage throughout the season. The latter also makes great fall color
* White beardtongue in a large drift (12-15 plants, though they will also seed themselves out) for late May to early June color
* Smalls beardtongue and other lavender/pink beardtongues near the edges for May color
* Lanceleaf coreopsis for long-lasting yellow color in early summer
* Purple coneflower and/or Tennessee coneflower planted in a large drift (no less than 10) because they are the poster child of the native plant garden
* Slender mountain mint and short-tooth mountain mint for the pollinators, but beware: they spread, especially the latter
* Black-eyed susans because they get you through August, color-wise
* Medium-sized goldenrods and asters for September
* Aromatic asters and pink Muehligrass for October
* Little bluestem grass for fall and winter

**Planting**

Ideally, the median should be planted in the last two weeks of April to the first two weeks of May to capture the moisture of spring rains. In most years that leaves a narrow window for spraying the grass with round-up. You spray once on a dry and fairly wind-calmed day, and then again 10 days or so later. A day after the second spraying, planting can begin.

Typically, water needs to be transported to the median which is tedious, but some of that needs to be done anyway during the months after planting. Mulch should go down on the day when planting takes place. The mulch layer should be no more than 1 inch thick and perhaps a little less. Volunteers who do the planting should step around in the beds as little as possible, which people find hard to understand and to follow.

**Maintenance**

The maintenance tasks in the median consist of weeding, weeding, weeding and periodic dead-heading, especially in late fall. Consider leaving dead stalks standing in the median through the winter for winter interest, to feed birds and to provide nesting sites for bees and other insects. We should all get accustomed to a somewhat wilder look instead of the meticulously neat and ecologically dead landscapes of the past. Nevertheless, look at your median periodically throughout the winter and evaluate what has begun to look really bad and cut those stalks down.

Concerning weeding: at first there will be lots of typical garden weeds that we are all familiar with. Later one has to suppress seedling of some of the plants that were originally planted because they can be extremely competitive and suppress other plants in the long run. A tentative approach might be to keep all seedlings in the vicinity of their mother plants, but weed out those that have spread elsewhere in the bed.

Don’t rely on mulching to suppress weeds and seedlings. Even if you do remulch, which is probably a good idea in the early years but which may become unnecessary later on, you don’t want to mulch early in the spring, since many of your desired seedling are not up yet.

**Plant List: Herbacious Plants for Traffic Medians**

*The plant list is organized by plant height and within height* *category it is organized roughly in succession of bloom*. The rule is to put short plants in front of the garden bed and tall ones in back, medium ones in the middle. You can google these plants to see what they look like when flowering. Bloom time as follows: Sp=Spring through May, S=Summer, LS=Late summer (August to mid-September), F=Fall (after mid-September). An asterix (\*) means the flower stalk of that plant should be cut back by half in late May or early June to control its height. None of these plants need fertilizer, with the possible exception of garden phlox which will produce a second and third bloom with a fertilizer application in mid summer.

**1.)** **Plants below 1 ft. high for edges and along pavement**

Creeping phlox, Sp, drought tolerant

Creeping thyme, S, drought tolerant, not native

All oreganos and marjorams, S, drought tolerant, not native

**2.) Plants 1 – 2 ft. high**

Monarda bradburiana, Sp

Small’s beardtongue, Sp.

Hairy beardtongue, Sp to S

Eared coreopsis, Sp

Lanceleaf coreopsis, Sp to S, drought tolerant

Meadow phlox, Sp to S, needs moisture

Downy phlox, S, drought tolerant

Butterfly milkweed, S, drought tolerant, needs full sun

Threadleaf coreopsis, S, drought tolerant

Mistflower, LS, needs moisture, benefits from some shade

Sedum ‘Autumn Joy’, LS, drought tolerant, full sun, not native

**3.) Plants 2 ½ to 4 ft. high**

Arkansas bluestar, Sp, drought tolerant

Eastern bluestar, Sp, drought tolerant

Smooth beardtongue, Sp to S

Indian physic, Sp to S, drought tolerant

Swamp milkweed, S, needs full sun and moisture

Purple coneflower, S

Wild quinine, S

Slender mountain mint, S

Bergamot, S, drought tolerant

Garden phlox, S to LS, needs moisture

Short-toothed mountain mint, S to LS, tiny flowers but pretty plant, **great for pollinators**!

Elm-leaf goldenrod\*, LS

Scented goldenrod, LS

Erect goldenrod, F, drought tolerant

Aromatic aster\*, F

Calico aster, F, needs moisture

Royal Catchfly