

## BEAUTIFYING A TRAFFIC MEDIAN 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. Traffic medians are of various widths. Those between 10 and 20 feet, which seem typical, could accommodate **shrubs** or small **trees**. Introducing showier **perennial plants**, especially natives, into the median will make the neighborhood more welcoming to residents and visitors. The plants suggested here will also provide ecological benefits by attracting pollinators and feeding birds. See the complete lists below.

**Shrubs** provide winter structure. **St. John's wort** (*Hypericum* sp.), **New Jersey tea** (*Ceanothus americanus*) or a small **ninebark** (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) would work well. For evergreens, consider a spreading **yew** (*Taxus*) or a small round **arborvitae** (*Thuja*).

**Trees** can be added depending on size of the median and the amount of sunlight. 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.

Most herbaceous **perennial flowers and grasses** need to be planted in **drifts**, that is, in multiples of seven or more to make the strong visual impact essential for the median. Most people will see these plants only while driving by. Plants that are natural spreaders, like **creeping phlox**, **mints**, **bee balm** and **black-eyed Susan**, can be planted singly, keeping in mind they will spread.

Plants should be arranged so that the shorter ones are along the edges and taller ones are toward the middle. Except for trees, nothing should grow higher than 3-4 feet to keep the traffic engineers happy. Some two-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, add a path 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 boulder and installation cost could be high.

**Here are some plants that are particularly useful. See pages 3-4 for more ideas.**

- Creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera* and *P. subulata*), both lavender and hot pink, add spring color along the edges.
- Eastern bluestar (*Amsonia tabernaemontana*) and Arkansas bluestar (*A. hubrichtii*) provide dependable foliage throughout the season. The latter also adds great fall color.
- White beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*) in a large drift (12-15 plants) provides late May to early June color. They will self-seed.
- Small's beardtongue (*P. smallii*) and other lavender/pink beardtongues provide May color near the edges.
- Lanceleaf coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) adds long-lasting yellow color in early summer. The smaller, ear-leaf species (*C. auriculata*) can be used along the edges.
- Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) planted in a large drift (no less than 10) is the poster child of the native plant garden.
- Slender mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*) and short-tooth mountain mint (*P. muticum*) are popular for the pollinators, but they spread, especially the latter.
- Black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia hirta*) are easy to grow and provide color through August.
- Autumn goldenrod (*Solidago sphacelata*) is short, easy to grow and provides fall color.
- Aromatic aster (*Symphiotrichum oblongifolium*) only grows to 2 feet and provides purple color in the fall.
- Native pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia*) blooms pink in October.
- Little bluestem grass (*Schizachyrium*) blooms bronze-purple.

### **Planting**

Ideally, the median should be planted late April to early May to take advantage of spring rains. In most years that leaves a narrow window for spraying the grass with round-up. Spray once on a dry, calm day, and 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 necessary. About 1-inch of mulch should be added when planting takes place. Volunteers should be trained to step in the beds as little as possible to prevent soil compaction.

### **Maintenance**

The maintenance tasks in the median consist of weeding and more weeding and periodic dead-heading, especially in late fall. Consider leaving dead stalks standing in the median through the winter to feed birds and provide nesting sites for bees and other insects. We should all get accustomed to a wilder look instead of the meticulously neat and ecologically dead landscapes of the past. Nevertheless, look at your median periodically throughout the winter and cut stalks that are unsightly.

Note the emphasis on weeding! Thinning is another issue. You may have to remove seedlings from the more aggressive, competitive plants. 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.

After the initial planting and mulching, don't rely on mulching to suppress all the weeds and unwanted seedlings. Avoid mulching early in the spring since many of your desired seedlings are not up yet.

### **Plant List: Herbaceous Plants for Traffic Medians**

Online you will find good information at the Missouri Botanic Garden Plant Finder (<https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/>) or the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (<https://www.wildflower.org/>).

Bloom times: 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 can be cut back by half in late May or early June to control 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 (*Phlox stolonifera*, *P. subulata*), Sp, drought tolerant

Creeping thyme (*Thymus* sp.), S, drought tolerant, not native

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

#### **2.) Plants 1 – 2 ft. high**

Bradbury's bee balm (*Monarda bradburiana*), Sp

Small's beardtongue (*Penstemon smallii*), Sp.

Hairy beardtongue (*Penstemon hirsutus*), Sp to S

Eared coreopsis (*Coreopsis auriculata*), Sp

Lanceleaf coreopsis (*C. lanceolata*), Sp to S, drought tolerant

Threadleaf coreopsis (*C. verticillata*), S, drought tolerant

Meadow phlox (*Phlox maculata*), Sp to S, needs moisture

Downy phlox (*P. pilosa*), S, drought tolerant

Butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), S, drought tolerant, needs full sun

Sedum 'Autumn Joy' (*Hylotelephium*), LS, drought tolerant, non-native

Autumn goldenrod (*Solidago sphacelata*), F,

Golden Alexander (*Zizia aurea*), S

#### **3.) Plants 2 ½ to 4 ft. high**

Arkansas bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*), Sp, drought tolerant

Eastern bluestar (*A. tabernaemontana*), Sp, drought tolerant

Eastern smooth beardtongue (*Penstemon laevigatus*) Sp to S

Indian physic/Bowman's root (*Gillenlia trifoliata*), Sp to S, drought tolerant

Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), S, needs full sun and moisture

Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), S

Wild quinine (*Parthenium integrifolium*), S

Slender mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*), S

Short-toothed mountain mint (*P. muticum*), S to LS, aromatics, pollinators  
Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), S, drought tolerant  
Garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*), S to LS, needs moisture  
Elm-leaf goldenrod (*Solidago ulmifolia*)\*, LS  
Scented goldenrod (*Solidago odora*), LS  
Showy goldenrod (*Solidago erecta*), F, drought tolerant  
Aromatic aster (*Symphiotrichum oblongifolium*), \* F  
Calico aster (*S. lateriflorum*), F, needs moisture  
Royal catchfly (*Silene regia*), S,

**Updated 03-2025, Ann Witherington, M.S.**