

Common Plant Definitions

Annual

A plant that completes its entire life cycle in one year. It will sprout, produce flowers and seeds, then die (Examples: Fetid Goosefoot, Tumbleweed).

Biennial

A plant that completes its life cycle in two years. During the first year, the plant will only produce vegetative parts/leaves, often in a basal form or rosette. During the second year, the plant will produce reproductive parts, i.e., flowers and seeds, then die (Examples: Mullein, Hollyhock).

Perennial

A plant whose life cycle extends across several growing seasons or years. These plants will often take time to reach a mature age before they flower and set seed. Most species will flower and set seed multiple times over their lifespans (Examples: Blue Grama, Penstemon/Beardtongue).

Native, Indigenous

Species of plants that existed in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans.

Non-native, Non-indigenous, Exotic

Species of plants that did not exist in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans. These plants may have come from Europe or other continents such as Asia or Australia.

- Some non-native plants arrived in North America unintentionally through human activities such as stowaways in a ship ballast, in clothing or the fur of livestock, or contaminated purchased seed lots. Other non-native species were introduced intentionally, for their commercial or ornamental value.

Naturalized

Species of plants that are not native to North America but have established self-sustaining populations that do not need human intervention to thrive (Examples: Tumbleweed, Salt Cedar).

Invasive

Typically refers to non-native species of plants that have established large populations that spread aggressively, displace native species, disrupt natural ecosystem processes, and otherwise cause harm to native habitats.

- NOTE: Not all non-native plants are invasive (Example: Lambsquarters). Also, some native species can act in an invasive manner, i.e. spread quickly and dominate a large area, when processes that would otherwise control the population are disrupted (Example: Creosote).

Noxious

A status designated by a governmental entity to classify a plant as having potential negative impacts to public health, agriculture, recreation, wildlife, or property. The noxious weed designation establishes guidelines and targets these plants for control or eradication.

- NM State Noxious Weed List: <https://nmdeptag.nmsu.edu/media/pdf/noxious-weed-memo-and-list-june-2020.pdf>
- Federal USDA Noxious Weed List: <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/media/document/46865/file>

Weed

Any plant growing where it is not wanted. Weeds can be native or non-native, invasive or non-invasive, noxious or not noxious.

- “Weedy” is a term used to describe an opportunistic life strategy in plants. These species are usually annuals; grow in disturbed areas with little water, nutrients, or competition; and produce large quantities of seed.

Palatable

Plants that are suitable for consumption by livestock. This depends on many factors, including season and precipitation, as well as the physical quality of the plants.

Non-palatable

Plants that are not preferred by and not suitable for consumption by livestock. This may be due to seasonality, taste or texture, or toxicity.

Nitrogen Fixers

Plants that have mutually beneficial relationships with bacteria to convert nitrogen from the air into a form that is usable by plants. These bacteria live in nodules, or small swellings on the roots of the plants. Most plants in the legume family (Example: Fabaceae) are nitrogen fixers (Example: Alfafa, Clover, Mesquite, Vetch, Locoweed)

- Nitrogen is a critical nutrient for plant growth and is not found in large quantities naturally in the soil. It is one of the three primary limiting nutrients for plant growth, including Phosphorus and Potassium

Adapted From: Flora Neomexicana III (Allred et al. 2020), Plant Identification Terminology, Second Edition (Harris & Harris, 2001), Go Botany (Native Plant Trust 2026; <https://gobotany.nativeplanttrust.org/glossary/a/>)

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Other Terms

Population

A group of plants of the same species living within a close geographic area.

Plant Community (or Vegetation Community)

All plant species living within a close geographic area, including all growth forms and life strategies. A vegetation community establishes the basis for all other ecosystem components.

Plant Associations

Species that are usually found growing together in natural environments. The USDA guides can aid in choosing a proper mix of species for restoration activities.

Disturbance

An event that disrupts the natural life cycles and natural processes in an ecosystem. This may be environmental (e.g., fire, flood, or insects) or human-caused (e.g., dozer lines).

Succession

The process by which a plant community changes over time. This process is often restarted by a disturbance event.

Keystone Species

A species that plays a disproportionately critical role in keeping an ecosystem functioning in a productive manner. For example, oaks provide shelter and food to an abundance of wildlife that is not provided in the same quantities by any other plant species within the same ecosystem.

