

July EcoQuest: Prairie Gentian (*Eustoma russellianum*)

More than 130 years ago, Alice Eastwood recorded prairie gentian (*Eustoma russellianum*) as part of Denver's native flora. Today, this Great Plains wildflower is rarely encountered in the metro area, making every observation an important piece of Denver's botanical history.

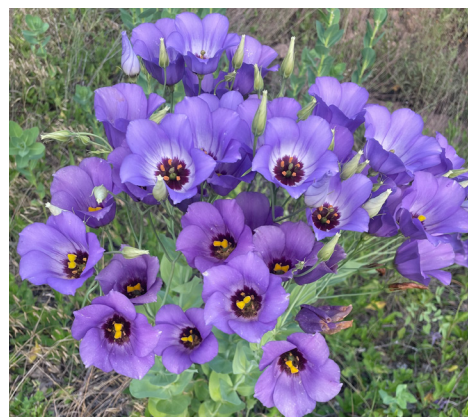
Prairie gentian has waxy blue-green leaves and large, trumpet-shaped flowers in shades of lavender, blue, pink or white. Also known as Texas bluebell, this striking wildflower is native to the Great Plains, where it grows in moist prairies, wet meadows, stream edges and other seasonally wet habitats. It typically blooms from June through September.

Although prairie gentian is common farther south, especially in Texas, it has always been uncommon around Denver. It is currently listed as Vulnerable in Colorado by NatureServe (S3). In "A Popular Flora of Denver" (1893), Alice Eastwood included prairie gentian as part of the local flora and encouraged readers not only to identify plants but also to observe where they grew and how they interacted with other species. Today, community scientists continue that work by documenting plants through iNaturalist, helping us understand how Denver's flora has changed over the past 130 years.

The prairie gentian population appears to have declined locally. The most recent herbarium collections from the Denver area were made in 1981 in Wheatridge at a vacant lot that was soon to be developed. Only 11 collections have been made total, with the first in 1912 by Florence Knipe. In more recent history, there have been nine observations on iNaturalist, starting in 2015 and most recently in 2020. Whether the species has become rarer or has simply been overlooked, every observation helps improve our understanding of its current distribution.

If you're exploring this summer, keep an eye out in wet meadows, stream corridors, restored prairies and other moist habitats, especially following summer rains. If you find prairie gentian, photograph the flowers, leaves and the entire plant before uploading your observation to iNaturalist.

Your observations support the [Flora of Denver project](#) and help compare today's plant communities with those documented by Alice Eastwood more than a century ago.



Showy Prairie Gentian (*Eustoma russellianum*), [neonaberration](#), some rights reserved, CC BY-NC.



Showy Prairie Gentian (*Eustoma russellianum*), [kate152](#), some rights reserved, CC BY-NC.

What is an EcoQuest?

EcoQuests, part of the Denver EcoFlora project, challenge people to become community scientists and observe, study and conserve the native plants of the City via iNaturalist, an easy-to-use mobile app.

How Do I Get Started?

1. Download the iNaturalist app or register online at [iNaturalist.org](https://www.inaturalist.org).
2. Take photos of the plants in bloom that you find on your daily neighborhood walk. It is ok if they are weeds! But avoid taking photos of cultivated plants in gardens or in your home.
3. If you are concerned about revealing the location of sensitive organisms or observations at your own house, you can hide the exact location from the public by changing the "geoprivacy" of the observation to "obscured."

4. Post your findings on iNaturalist via the app.
5. Your observations will automatically be added to the [Denver EcoFlora Project](#).
6. You can add an identification to your photo when you post your findings on iNaturalist, or leave it blank for others to identify.

What is the Goal?

The EcoFlora project is designed to meaningfully connect people with biodiversity, and to assemble novel observations and data on the metro area's flora to better inform policy decisions and conservation strategies.

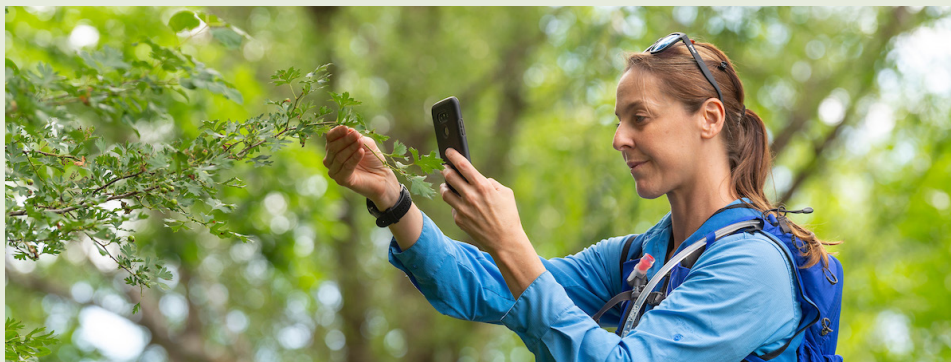


Photo by Scott Dressel-Martin