



Wildflower Seed Mixes

Planting and Maintenance

Why You Should Consider Wildflowers in Your Landscape Plans

Whether you are renovating an old pasture, naturalizing commercial sites or transforming an old flower bed or unused section of lawn, wildflower mixes are a beautiful, low-cost alternative.

Once wildflowers are established, maintenance is almost nil. They need no annual fertilization and actually do better on poorer soil.

Soil Preparation

As with any type of seeding, soil preparation is very important. The MOST IMPORTANT factor in wildflower seeding is the eradication of existing vegetation from the site. Following manufacturer's recommendations, the spraying of an appropriate herbicide is a quick means of accomplishing this. Methods alternative to chemical use include digging to remove sod (this method should include the addition of organic matter such as finished compost); tilling; and smothering with paper, cardboard or plastic sheeting. The next step after each method should include tilling of the soil to a depth not to exceed 3 inches.

How to Plant Wildflower Seed Mixes

Prepared soil should be raked to form grooves ensuring good soil-seed contact. Seed should be spread with a mechanical spreader on large sites or hand broadcast on smaller areas. Because most wildflower seed is small, mixing it with vermiculite, clean sand or milorganite is advisable to "bulk up" the mixture, making it easier to spread. After spreading, lightly rake over seed again.

Timing of Planting

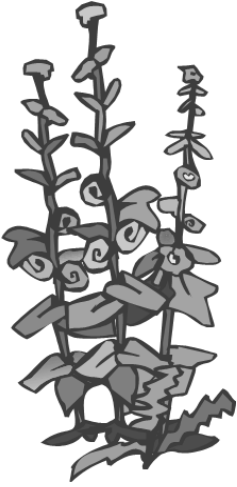
Generally early spring is the best time to plant wildflowers, but a good stand is possible if planted in late summer or early fall also. Avoid the hot summer months as they are usually dry and the heat stresses young plants. If you are planting in late summer or early fall, allow AT LEAST 8 to 10 weeks before the first expected frost in your area. This allows the annuals time to bloom and set seed and the perennial varieties enough growth to survive the winter months.

Coverage

As a general rule, wildflower mixes should be planted at the rate of 4 lbs. per acre. However, the rate can be doubled or even more for a thicker initial growth and bloom of flowers. The heavier rate may be desirable especially on smaller sites or wildflower beds where the planting will be viewed at close range. The heavier rate is also recommended if you intend to pick the flowers a great deal.

What to do After Seeding

If possible, twice daily watering of the seeded area is advisable to aid in germination of the seed. Mulching with clean straw (not fresh hay as it contains weed seeds) or peat moss will help hold soil moisture where watering is not possible. When mulching, be sure not to cover the area too deeply. You should be able to see the soil through the mulch. If soil is extremely sterile, a light application of a 0-10-10 fertilizer may be beneficial to help establish the plants. Never use a fertilizer containing nitrogen (the first number in the analysis) as this will only encourage undesirable grass and weed growth.



You should see seedlings in 10 to 21 days depending on weather conditions. The first flowers should appear 5 to 6 weeks afterward.

Once the plants are established they need very little actual care. During extended hot, dry periods, watering would be helpful. Some native weed invasion is inevitable, but the established wildflowers actually discourage the growth of the low growing weeds. On smaller plots, hand weeding takes care of the problem quite easily.

An annual mowing of the flowers is also recommended. This should be done in the late fall after the annuals have gone to seed and the perennials have become dormant. This serves several purposes. It neatens the winter appearance of the area, discourages the growth of woody perennial plants and helps drop seed heads to the ground for growth in the spring. The mowing should not be done with a lawn mower as the cut would be too low. A 4 to 6 inch height of cut is ideal.

Mixing Other Seeds with Wildflowers

Especially on larger sites, the mixing of a compatible grass seed is advisable to fill in thinner areas and create a meadow effect. Hard fescues are the preferred varieties in northern latitudes. NEVER use ryegrass or bluegrass with the mix as both of these grasses are too competitive for the flowers. About 25 lbs. of fescue per acre is the recommended rate. Inclusion, at low rates, of clover or trefoil into a field planting is permissible also.

General Performance Characteristics of Wildflower Mixes

Wildflower mixes are available in a variety of mixtures for different conditions or preferences. All flowers need some sunlight and sites should be selected to provide as much sunlight as possible. Shady mixes include varieties that adapt to much lower light conditions than other types of wildflowers, but will not grow in dense shade without any sunlight.

Wildflower mixes can be planted on moderate slopes. Once the flowers are established, the root system will help stabilize the soil. Care should be taken for the first 4 weeks after planting on a slope to protect the site in case of heavy rains as the soil may wash. The use of netting or straw will aid in holding the soil.

At maturity, wildflowers will grow to a height of 2 to 3 feet, depending on soil and weather conditions. Different species not only flower at different times, but also at different heights, creating a pleasing colorful effect.

What to Expect in Years to Come

The varieties in wildflower mixtures are selected for hardiness and broad range of adaptability. Due to climate, weather and soil conditions, some natural selection will occur. The same mix planted in Vermont will not look like the same mix in Georgia, two years later. The perennial varieties generally will not bloom the first year but should become permanent fixtures for years to come. Every other year you may want to overseed the area to maintain the original balance of the mixture.