

WILDFLOWERS



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There are several good reasons for growing wildflowers besides their obvious beauty. A natural area is great wildlife habitat, attracting every creature from birds to butterflies. Wildflowers can be used to control erosion on a slope or as a lawn substitute (look into local ordinances and neighborhood reaction before going too "wild"). Wildflowers make a low-maintenance flower garden and may be just the thing for a vacation cabin.

When deciding what varieties of wildflowers to grow, first evaluate your site. Pay special attention to the available sunlight and moisture. While some wildflowers do very well in the shade, most prefer at least 6-8 hours of sun per day. Good drainage is important and can be improved, if necessary, by mixing peat moss and/or compost with the existing soil. Either start your wildflower garden with small plants (usually purchased in 4"-6" pots) or use a seed mixture. Do not dig wildflowers from the field as this is illegal in many cases. If using seeds, see that the mixture contains varieties that grow well in your area.

A misconception about wildflowers is that they are extremely easy to establish. In truth, you can't just quit mowing and throw some seeds out the door. When mature, there is little maintenance required; however, when first starting out, you must prepare the area carefully, especially if you want to control weeds. Till the area 6"-8" deep (or spade carefully if working around desirable plants), remove any debris, incorporate soil amendments as needed, and rake smooth. Organic matter such as peat moss or compost is especially important for shade-loving plants. Tilling will remove existing weeds and bring most weed seeds to the surface. Wait about 3 weeks for those weed seeds to germinate and grow. Spray these new weeds with an herbicide like Round-Up. Don't spray when it looks like rain or if it is windy. These chemicals will kill all vegetation, so use caution around desirable plants. Wait about 14 days and plant the wildflowers. You can skip the spraying step and go straight from tilling to planting, but be prepared for many weeds. The spraying step will save you work in the long run.

If using seeding plants, group them in clusters or drifts, not in rows. If using seed, broadcast by hand or use a whirly spreader. Barely cover the seeds with soil by raking very lightly. Water well (as you would for new grass seed) for about 4-6 weeks and supplement water the rest of the season as necessary, depending on the weather.

If planting on a slope, prepare as above, but after scattering seed, cover the area with a seed mat. This is a lightweight fabric that prevents erosion as the seeds germinate. You can also use a thin layer of hay.

Wildflower areas should be a mixture of annuals, biennials, and perennials to give you the widest range of color and flowering times. The first year the annuals do well. The second year, the biennials will flower, plus any annuals that may have reseeded themselves. The third year, and after, the perennials will be the mainstay. Your wildflower area will look different not only at different times of the year, but also in different years.

Try Jack-in-the-Pulpit, trillium, wild ginger, and columbine in a shady area. Consider meadow rue, purple coneflower, and butterfly weed for sunny areas. There are many varieties to choose from. Most seed mixes also contain ornamental grasses. Be sure they are clump-type grasses, such as fescue, and not grasses that spread by rhizomes (which would take over the area).

First year wildflower maintenance includes watering and weed control. Either hand pull new weeds or very carefully spray. Be sure to pull any woody plants that sneak in. Even a small elm seedling can quickly establish quite a root system. Maintenance in subsequent years will be easier. Weeds should become less of a problem as the wildflowers fill in. You may wish to reseed a few annual varieties every spring for additional color. Generally, there is no need to fertilize, unless your existing soil is extremely poor. If necessary, use a light dressing of 10-10-10. Too much fertilizer encourages weeds and lush foliage at the expense of the flowers. Once a year, in late fall after the wildflowers have set seed, cut the area down to about 4"-6" tall.

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