



Wildflower

Function, Planning, Planting and Management for Success on Your Course.

Wildflower beds can be a colorful, economical and environmental asset to your course. Photo by Kyle Sweet.

Kyle Sweet, CGCS, Sanctuary Golf Club

A wildflower is a flowering plant that grows in a natural, uncultivated state. In most cases, they are able to grow and flourish in difficult conditions, establishing and re-establishing with ease while remaining virtually pest and disease free. These strong survival characteristics and increased market availability have led to more golf courses using both seasonal and perennial wildflowers.

Their use can reduce the typical maintenance needs that would be required for seasonal annual color, provide an interesting alternative to high maintenance turf areas, and enhance the habitat for valuable pollinators.

Pollination is the act of transferring pollen grains from the male anther of a flower to the female stigma. It is the goal of every living organism, including plants, to create offspring for the next generation. Plants produce offspring by making seeds and flowers are the tools that plants use to make their seeds. Seeds are produced

when pollen is transferred between flowers of the same species.

Flowers rely on vectors such as wind, water, birds, insects, butterflies, bats and other animals to get pollen from one flower to another. Pollinators are the animals or insects that transfer the pollen from plant to plant although typically pollination is the unintended consequence of an animal's activity on a flower.

Pollinators are usually eating or collecting pollen for their nutrition, or are sipping nectar from the flower when pollen grains attach to the animal's body. So, when the animal visits another flower for the same reason, pollen can fall onto the stigma of another flower and can result in successful reproduction of the flower. See USDA/US Forest Service at www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/pollinators for more information on this topic.

It is important to think of wildflowers as food for these important pollinators. Without pollinators, the human race

and all of earth's terrestrial ecosystems would not survive. Some plants are self pollinators, or can be pollinated by the pollen moving by way of wind or water, but overwhelmingly our crop plants around the world require pollination by animals. We cannot live without pollinators. Improving and enhancing their survivability can be achieved by incorporating wildflowers into your golf course and community landscapes.

Like any other project, wildflower beds require planning for best success. Consider these three important factors when thinking of using wildflowers on your property: seed choices, planting locations and timing of planting.

Seed Choices

Wildflower seed is becoming increasingly available, as its popularity has increased. Determining what is best for you can be made easier by speaking to a reputable seed supplier. Researching the Internet

can be very informative and is a great tool to communicate your ideas to your club owner, members or manager. When making this choice, keep in mind that multiple wildflower varieties may be very beneficial to the planting success, much like overseeding blends that have become popular for our winter course turf needs.

Planting Locations

Mass plantings are the best approach in most course settings. Successful implementation will provide for good presentation, reduced maintenance, sufficient sunlight and will not interfere with the playability of the course. Take the time to determine where locations offer maximum exposure to your golfers, which is often the teeing area or alongside cart paths.

Turf areas around the tees can sometimes be removed to facilitate planting. In most cases, this maintained turf is never played from, and a planting bed instead of turf may reduce your maintenance inputs for the area. Flowering plants need sunshine so pay close attention to what your seasonal sun conditions will be in your

desired planting area. Remember, Florida golf is at its peak season when the sun is lowest in the sky.

Lastly, review your proposed planting areas with your golf professional. These areas may be marked as an ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area), but that should be determined by your course professional or appropriate committee. It will be best to protect these areas, and marking in this way can be very effective.

Timing of Planting

Choose the time when you want the flowers to be their best and determine your timing of planting based on that. If you choose a mix of several varieties of wildflowers, different varieties will germinate, grow and flower at different times and can make your planting very interesting as they fully establish.

Typically, the window for planting in South Florida is mid to late October, for more moderate temperatures while the plants are young, giving great presentation by Jan. 1. Planting different beds at different times can provide for varied colors and size throughout the course

if desired. Gaillardia (Blanket Flower) should be included in all plantings so this heat-loving plant can establish as the winter season wraps up and will provide color and function during the summer months.

Once you have committed to trying your hand at installing wildflower beds here are some tips on what worked for us:

Wildflower Planting Procedures

- Preparation and planting of wildflower areas is not difficult and can be easily accomplished with existing personnel and equipment. To improve seed-to-soil contact and provide a soft soil for new plant roots, rototilling is recommended at a depth of 4 inches. Prior to rototilling, any weeds on the surface should be sprayed out, or in the case of replacing a turf area, the turf should be removed with a deep cut from a sod cutter. This process is repeated year after year in the same planting areas. If problematic weeds continue to emerge and establish amongst your flowers, utilizing Basamid soil fumigant can be very effective and

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Using this Gulf Coast Carribbean seed mix provides a variety of germination rates to keep the bed colorful over a longer time period . Photo by Kyle Sweet.

In some cases hand planting may be the best way to apply and conserve expensive seed mixes. Photo by Kyle Sweet.



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can nearly eliminate persistent weeds that compete with the wildflower establishment.

- In some cases it may be beneficial to incorporate a muck soil or compost into the planting area. Much of Florida has barren sandy soils that do not support moisture holding or have a high CEC. Starter fertilization is not typically needed for wildflowers. If there is a known high / low pH issue that needed correction for turf growth, that same correction would be needed prior to seeding.
- Seeding rates vary among varieties and your supplier can help you by providing recommended rates. In the golf course setting it may be necessary to increase the suggested rate for quicker coverage, but be careful not to plant too heavily as this will cause crowding out and decrease the plants' opportunity to grow to maturity and exhibit full flowering. Measure out the planting area, weigh out the needed seed for the area based on your rate, then bag and label the seed with the area it is intended for. This will help with controlling your rates and budget for your planting, as most seed varieties are several dollars/pound.
- Some seed can be spread with a rotary spreader or a belly spreader, but in many cases it is done by hand. When applying by hand, preparation with pre-measuring and weighing is very important so seed is not wasted and is applied as needed.
- Like any other new plant, wildflower seedlings require additional watering to be established. Small irrigation heads and specialized zones can be installed to water the areas, or existing irrigation heads may need to be adjusted to cover properly. Once the wildflowers are established, irrigation will not be needed. Florida winters can be unpredictable, so if you have a big investment in wildflowers, be aware of plants drying out to the point of damage and be ready to water if needed.

Management of Wildflower areas

Management of wildflower areas should not have to be excessive, but don't mistake reduced maintenance for no maintenance. Maintenance items include pulling of weeds, trimming along planting edges, occasional water if too dry, interseeding back in to the area as needed, and dead-heading of spent flowers.

With no pre-emergent herbicide in place before planting, you can count on some weeds amongst your plantings. Many use the approach of pulling the weeds as the weeds become larger than the plants. Sometimes spot spraying may be needed, but typically avoided and pulled by hand.

As the plants mature they can easily intrude on adjacent turf edges and cart paths. Routine pulling of plants and trimming may be needed to protect the plants from being mowed and impeding on pathways. Bordering all planting edges with a pre-emergent herbicide and mulching is an effective way to reduce this maintenance.

Always have some seed on hand that is a quick germinator. A splash of seed in a bare area or area where plants are damaged can quickly grow in and provide cover. Tall spent flowers can be unsightly and can cause the need to dead-head to keep a

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good presentation. If multiple varieties are used in the planting, this won't be as critical, but discussion with your supplier on the life span and size of the flower choices can be very important to reduce this maintenance need.

Seeding Costs and Maintenance Input Reduction

Wildflower seed cost can vary greatly. Typically, a standard prepared blend of wildflower varieties will cost approximately \$25 per pound. These standard mixes are normally available year round with ample supplies. A custom mix could cost significantly more and availability may be limited. Overall, the cost of wildflowers is much less than planting annual bedding flowers.

At a planting rate of 2 pounds per 1000 square feet, which is a generous rate for blended seed mixes, it would cost \$500 to establish a 10,000 square-foot area by seed. By comparison, annual bedding

plants at a cost of 69 cents each, planted on 12-inch centers would cost \$6,900 for the same 10,000 square-foot area. Annual bedding plants provide somewhat instant gratification, but the same colorful effect can be achieved with wildflowers at a significantly less price.

In addition to the initial cost of seed, wildflowers will require little to no fertilizer inputs or fungicide applications. These reduced inputs will save material and labor costs, which can add up to a large amount during the course of the seasonal months and beyond.

Wildflowers can provide dramatic color presentations on the golf course while at the same time benefit important pollinators that are important to us all. If desired, wildflower plantings can replace high maintenance turf areas and can be a successful substitute for the use of annual bedding flowers. With proper planning, planting and management, you can create a new feature on your course year after year that you can be proud of.



Wildflower beds provide food and habitat for pollinators which are critical for plant life. Photo by Kyle Sweet.

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