

NATURALIZING WITH WILDFLOWERS

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Naturalizing with wild flowers is an adventure much different from that of cultivatead gardening or growing turf. The use of wildflowers offers an opportunity to use an adverse habitat, and to accentuate nature. Use of wildflowers, especially on golf courses, has been justified by their low cost and low maintenance. I believe there are many other arguments for advocating the use of these modest yet romantic plantings.

I have met few people who do not like flowers. Croly wrote, "Flowers are natures jewels, whose wealth she decks her summer beauty." Flowers brighten up our lives and are a great way to break up

conformity. Unlike turf or cultivated flower beds, wild flower gardens offer an ever changing progression of color and textures. The fast growing annuals are the first to fill in, baby's breath and snapdragons offer a soft texture with whites and pinks. In progression, corn poppies dominate with their brilliant splashes of vibrant reds, pinks and whites. This stage appears to be everyone's favorite, the colors are so radiant they seem to glow at night. Next the area turns to a sea of powder blue, as the bachelor buttons emerge. With each visit the field offers a different scenic attraction.

However, as odd as it may seem wildflower plantings offer more than just beautiful flowers. They offer opportunity for interesting wild life. Few environments are more sterile than a well manicured turf; it is an unnatural and vulneraable monoculture. Turf, itself, is one of the most impoverished bird habitats on earth. While some birds such as robins and starlings will feed on grassy areas, goldfinches and song birds will be attracted to the seeds of bachelor's buttons, cornflowers, thistles and others. Butterflies, who display beautiful fleeting splashes of color will be attracted to goldenrod, mallow, Queen Anne's lace and thistle. Occasionally, a hummingbird can be found seeking the sweet nectar of snapdragons or dianthus. Honeybees keep the garden alive and buzzing with their restlessness. Though bees can be a hazard, due to stings, these pollinaters are indispensable inhabitants on this planet.

Wild flower planting sites might include problem areas, such as hill sides which are difficult to mow; low wet areas which are difficult to drain; or shaded areas where turf will not thrive. An area can be selected that will be far enough out of plan and offer a pleasant scene. It is nice to select areas that can be viewed from more than one golf hole. Consulting with the pro may be of some help in selecting an area.

The size of the area is not as important as the shape and location. Interesting contours on a gradual slope are pleasing. The area may include trees or shrubs. Wildflowers play "survival of the fittest".



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Many seed houses, garden centers and suppliers offer wildflower seed mixtures. Distributors, supplying the most complete mixes, formulate them for different geographic regions or different climatic areas as to wet or dry. For each, the mainstays are perennials native to the regions, or perennials which are best suited to the growing conditions. For this reason a mix with a high percentage of perennials is desirable. A mix may contain as many as 20 different annuals, biennials and perennials to provide a continuous period of bloom. Some firms list varieties separately, enabling you to select those best suited to your locality and interests. There has been some concern as to whether wildflowers invade lawn or surrounding areas. I have not noticed such a problem. However, two pest species should be avoided. Purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaris*) and siderwort (*Tradescantia virginiana*) are aggressive push plants that may create a problem. Purple loosestrife is so prolific, it is threatening our natural wet lands. Currently most seed companies have excluded these species. Non-aggressive grasses, such as hard fescues, may be added to the mix if planting is done on a slope, or where erosion may be a problem. Hard or sheep fescues offer quick germination, providing soil stabilization. However, it should be noted that aggressive grasses, such as bluegrasses or bentgrasses are wildflower's worst enemy. For this reason fertilizing is not recommended. It is believed fertilizing promotes weeds and excessive vegetative growth. Nevertheless, I fertilized half of one of our gardens with Superphosphate and these flowers held their blooms longer. I believe high nitrogen fertilizers are the culprits.

Spring is the best time to plant most wildflower mixes, preferably as soon as the soil is workable. The idea is to provide ample time and proper condition for the plants to germinate, grow, flower and set seed. For the annuals, that is the only way to ensure the next generation. Recommended planting rates vary on seed mixes. Generally 4-7 pounds per acre are sufficient to establish a good ground cover. I like to increase the rate by 50%. This gives a quick establishment of thick flowers. However, if too high a rate is used, the quick

germinating annuals may shade out the next phase.

We prepared the bed at North Shore Country Club by first spraying the area with roundup at recommended rate. Ten days later the area was rotilled with a tractor mount tiller. This was done until the soil had a fine texture 3-4 inches deep. The bed was then raked firm with a sand pro. Marking paint was used to create a grid to assist in hand broadcasting the seed. Miorganite was used as a filler to aid in even seed dispersion. After seeding, the area was dragged with a piece of chain link fence to lightly cover the seeds with soil. Finally, the bed was rolled, and lightly irrigated until seedlings were well established. Alternate applications may include hydroseeding or the use of a No-Till Rangeland Grass Drill. The special drill seeder is especially good for overseeding older wildflower areas that have most of their annuals.

Maintenance of wildflowers is generally low. However, hand weeding may be necessary until wildflowers establish themselves. Mowing is desirable in helping to keep out some weeds and woody plants. We mow our gardens late in the fall when all the seed heads are set. A mulcher attachment is used at its highest setting. If possible we try to mow after a prolonged dry spell. The soil forms cracks, allowing seeds to find their way into the cracks as the leaves and stems are left as mulch. This helps in natural reseeding of annuals. However, if an ongoing annual display is important, overseeding with a mixture of annual species may be necessary every 3-5 years.

The use of wildflowers, native grasses or prairie restoration is exciting. I am sure the membership at our club enjoyed the wildflowers. There have been more photos taken of the wildflower area than were ever taken of the "prestigious" 18th green. I realize golf course superintendent's first priority is providing the best playing conditions for the game of golf. But I believe a close second is to create a diverse, exciting environment, which will provide interest and enjoyment of the outdoors for those who play the game we depend on.

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