

# Confusion About WILDFLOWERS

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Thirty years ago a campaign to "Beautify America" was inspired by Lady Bird Johnson. Her ambitions were not political. She had simple observations that grew from a sense of loss. Why were highways riddled with garish billboards, the ditches full of litter, and the fields she had remembered as a child, void of color? Where were the wildflowers? Her enthusiastic efforts resulted in an awakening.

Golf courses have benefited from this campaign. Wildflowers are a popular choice for improving the environment. They are promoted for their wildlife habitat, color and no maintenance; however, there is a wealth of confusion surrounding wildflowers.

The confusion is understandable because the marketplace has two different groups of products called by the same name. . . wildflowers. In an effort to differentiate, the two types will be referred to as **prairie** and **color accents**. Adding to the confusion are the promotions made about wildflowers concerning habitat, color and no maintenance. The promises about wildflower are all true, but the "fine points" and "closer comparisons" between the two types tell a truer picture.

The creation of a prairie requires utilizing **native** seeds of grasses and wildflowers to create a balanced plant community. The emphasis on **native** cannot be overstated. Ideally the resource where the native seeds are collected and produced is less than 200 miles from the future prairie site. The production of native prairie seed is labor intensive and expensive.

Prairie seeds are not difficult to install, just slow to mature. Initially the site is very unappealing (weed patch) and requires considerable work the first three to five years. Only after these years of work can the "promises" of minimal maintenance, color and habitat start to be realized.

## What Does the Work Entail?

The battle in the first three years is minimizing weeds. If this war is not won, the battle continues. Unmaintained weeds create more weed seeds and a shade canopy for the desirable plants. The best option is to have weed control prior to planting. The next best option is to mow the vegetation down to 4-6 inches in height. Mowing minimizes the shade canopy, reduces flower/weed seed production, and acts as a form of pruning on the plants. Once the prairie is estab-

lished, the maintenance consists of a spring yearly mowing or burning.



*The orange Butterfly weed, yellow Black-eyed Susan, lavender Leadplant and white Yarrow create a medley of color in the prairie.*

## Are the Years of Work Worth the Effort? Absolutely yes.

A prairie is an environmental and aesthetic asset to a golf course. The continual flower color changes, the red fall color of the waving grasses, birds feeding and butterflies working the flowers are all positive contributions to our environment. The minimal upkeep will reduce the maintenance budget. Do not become discouraged by the lack of immediate color, the initial high cost of seed or the struggle to maintain weeds. The long term savings will far offset the initial investment of time and money.

The other wildflower option is referred to as "**color accents**." Color accents are creative seed mixtures of annual, biennial and perennial flowers. Beautiful displays of flower color begin within eight weeks of seeding and continue until frost. Annuals in the mixture insure quick and eager admiration from golfers. No other products perform such a high quality color spot for so little money, in so little time. Since the flower seeds are produced all over the world,

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## Wildflowers—

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shipped to specific destinations, and the mixtures concocted, the flower mixture costs are minimal when compared to the cost of native seed.

The unknown seed source does lead to some problems. A mixture will list a flower species as a perennial. Technically, this may be true, but in practicality, the plant may not be hardy in the Upper Midwest. The seed generated from a southern source of the same species can lack the hardiness vigor of its northern source. Additionally, the "foreign" flowers can have minimal appeal to "local" insects and birds as a food source or habitat.

The color accent type of wildflower scores very high for its aesthetic appeal the first and second year, but typically, the quality declines and the area must be reseeded every year. The costs to re-install the project every year or even every other year quickly add up. Another maintenance factor is the need to irrigate this type of wildflower. Failure to keep these areas moist during the heat of the summer will yield little if anything. In contrast, a well-established prairie can endure long periods of drought.



*Corn Poppies are popular in the color accent mixes because of their delicate white, pink and red flowers.*

When selecting the type of wildflower best suited for a site, consider the virtues and failings of both the prairie and color accent types. Review the criterion of no maintenance, color, wildlife habitat, irrigation and cost to reach a well-informed choice. "Color accents" are extremely appealing for aesthetics and low cost, but fall short when measuring the claims of "no maintenance" and habitat. Prairies, while expensive, can provide a measure of success in every category. Prairies are an ecological and aesthetic solution to improving the golf course environment and long term, will reduce the maintenance budget.

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