

## SELECTING AND UTILIZING WILDFLOWERS IN THE LANDSCAPE

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The utilization of wildflowers in the landscape is something that is not new, but has taken on a different dimension in the past five years. Operation Wildflower, a program involving the Federated Garden Clubs and the Michigan Department of Transportation, has been working with roadside plantings to a large degree since 1982. The largest project so far is an eight acre meadow planted with native Michigan seed at the Sarinac Rest Area in 1987. The evaluation of these roadside plantings and their successes and failures took a research oriented approach in 1987 when I began evaluating and monitoring plantings. This past year has also brought about the official formation of a new organization, the Wildflower Association of Michigan (W.A.M.) to provide an education clearinghouse to handle the many requests from both the private and public sectors.

The range of interests in the use of wildflowers in the landscape comes from many different directions. A partial list of interested groups or individuals might include the Right of Ways Association and the desire for low maintenance and aesthetics in the many acres of land operated by the various gas, electric and railroads; park and recreational plantings; golf courses, condo and apartment developments; businesses and industry; and many hundreds of interested home landscapers.

The important wildflower and native grass plants we are concerned with deal with the following environments: the prairie and meadow plants, which generally grow in poor soils, full sun and dry soils; the woodland communities and other plants we generally look at as primarily our spring wildflower show; the wetland and wet community plants that grow in the marshes and bog areas. Understanding native plant communities is of critical importance in learning to work with many of the wildflowers and native grasses. Landscape ecology, which has become an important new area of study, helps us to manage the native wildflower plantings that we are creating.

Understanding the functional uses of wildflowers and other native plants should help us to use them more fully in our landscape site situations. Important functional uses, such as erosion control, rebuilding poor soils, wet areas, low maintenance situations, creating habitat for wildlife, and beautification are all important components of effective native plant use. Knowing and utilizing the proper plants for our specific needs is the next step. For instance, annuals must be replanted each year if they do not readily reseed themselves, while perennials may live and proliferate for many years. It is important for the landscaper to understand which plants are native and which are non-native, or exotic species. Many non-natives may become aggressive or never establish themselves properly.

Seed for most wildflowers and native grasses is not readily available. Networks or sources of locally grown seed need to be established. If seed cannot be secured from the state of Michigan, it should be selected on a regional basis.

Some basic landscape design principles involved in the planting and management of native wildflowers and grasses use the understanding of nature's own design, as well as placement and selection of the proper species.

Management is an important consideration when dealing with wildflowers and native plants, both prior to planting, during planting, and is a continuous process after planting. Proper weed control and soil preparation, as well as planting methods, followed by mowing and weed control techniques, and even the use of burning to achieve our new native communities.

We are just beginning to answer some of these basic questions and a great deal of research needs to be done in the field of native plant management.