

REVEGETATING MASSACHUSETTS HIGHWAYS WITH AN ARRAY OF WILDFLOWER SODS

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The task of revegetating and maintaining roadsides is a major concern of highway engineers. Shallow, acid soils with low fertility and poor moisture retention, steep slopes, and southern exposures make challenging problems.

Improved safety specifications have forced areas to be regraded, which requires revegetation. The best solution for these areas would be to establish native plants that are aesthetic yet permanent, requiring minimal cost and maintenance. The standard practice has been to seed with grass, but grasslands are not a natural or climax vegetation in New England and proper maintenance is quite costly.

Another approach, to seed and plant native wildflower species along roadsides, has been established in many prairie states as an alternative to grasses. The flowers chosen are native, sometimes endangered in the area, and are not necessarily limited to highway use (5). Some problems still exist with wildflowers since some seeds are prohibitively expensive, dormancy requirements and grass or plant competition are not fully understood, and methods of establishment have not been specified. The use of sods for plant establishment has been practiced with turf (3) for a number of years. More recently, improved sods have been prepared using plastic netting to reinforce turf (4) or landscape materials (7). These sods provide quick and effective ground cover with proper handling, and can be used for slope stabilization or erosion control (6). Increased interest in roadside beautification has supported the use of wildflower species for plant cover and slope stabilization along highways.

Although some methods have been compared (2) for Massachusetts highways, the most successful method has not been selected. This project was designed to test the adaptiveness of wildflowers being studied on Massachusetts highways for sod production and the ability of these wildflower sods to become established on highway slopes.

Materials and Methods

The seeding rate study was conducted in French Hall greenhouses on the University of Massachusetts, Amherst campus (U.Mass.). In this test, four seed rates of each of thirteen wildflower species were compared in completely randomized design. The control seed rates varied with suppliers recommendations, and multiple rates of 5, 10, and 20 times were the treatments (Table 1). Sod seedbeds were prepared, using plastic trays (28 x 26 x 5 cm) known as half flats, with a pine barkpeat substrate above and below a piece of Spartan cloth netting to serve as a root binder.

The varieties tested were Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), Blanketflower (*Gaillardia aristata*), Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), Chicory (*Chicorium intyba*), Daisy (*Chrysanthemum leucanthemum* 'Alaska' and 'Ox-eye'), Dame's Rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*), Evening Primrose (*Oenothera lamarkiana*), Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), Prairie Coneflower (*Ratibida columnaris*), Spiked Gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*), and Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*). Seeds were sown by hand on the

Table 1. Species, Name, Source and Recommended Seed Rates of Wildflowers used in Sodding² Study.

Wildflower species	Common Name	Source ¹	Recommended Rate g/HF	lbs/Ac
<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow	H	.0104	1
<i>A. millefolium</i>	'Roseum' Yarrow	E	.0104	1
<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Butterfly Milkweed	H	.0520	5
<i>C. leucanthemum</i>	'Alaska' Daisy	H	.0624	6
<i>C. leucanthemum</i>	'Ox-eye' Daisy	E	.0624	6
<i>Cichorium intybus</i>	Chicory	E	.0520	5
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Purple Coneflower	E	.1249	12
<i>Gaillardia aristata</i>	Blanketflower	E	.1041	10
<i>Hesperis matronalis</i>	Dame's Rocket	H	.0832	8
<i>Hesperis matronalis</i>	Dame's Rocket	E	.0832	8
<i>Liatris spicata</i>	Spiked Gayfeather	E	.1249	12
<i>Oenothera lamarkiana</i>	Evening Primrose	E	.0312	3
<i>Ratibida columnaris</i>	Prairie Coneflower	E	.0312	3
<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>	Black-eyed Susan	H	.0416	4
<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>	Black-eyed Susan	E	.0416	4

²Seeds sown on peat-pine bark medium in 28 x 26 x 5 cm plastic half-flats (HF) under greenhouse conditions (15° C. NT).

¹E = Environmental Seed Producers, El Monte, CA 91734; H = Herbst Bros. Seed, Brewster, NY 10509.

surface of the substrate and germinated in the greenhouse at 15°C. night temperatures with intermittent misting. After germination, seeds were fertilized weekly with 200 parts per million nitrogen from soluble 20-20-20 fertilizer. Evaluations for sod use were based on the uniformity of plant cover and density of root growth after eight weeks while transplanting into field plots. After 1 year, sods were again examined for overwinter survival and spread into adjacent areas.

The same species were prepared (June, 1979) at the best seed rate for testing on highway slope areas. The test was located on a 2:1 sandy slope facing southwest along I-91 northbound in Bernardston about two miles south of the Vermont border. Plant establishment was evaluated in September and December, 1979.

Results and Discussion

The best seed rate for satisfactory sod formation of each species was as follows:

The field seed rate was satisfactory for sod formation of Black-eyed Susan, Evening Primrose and Yarrow, but other species required 5 or 10 times the field seed rate to produce sods. Spiked Gayfeather required 20 times the field rate, which may be economically unfeasible. These seed rates may appear high, but one report (1) stated that four times the recommended rate produced longer and more effective blooming of two wildflowers. A pinestraw mulch increased plant

establishment in most cases. If these sods can be placed on bare or critical slopes, natural spreading may be encouraged without expensive treatments or equipment being needed. The grouping or patchy appearance would not be unlike other grass or flower patches that appear on Massachusetts highways, particularly on steep slope areas that are minimally maintained even though they are extremely visible to motorists.

All but four species survived well in the field trial, with half of the survivors beginning to spread into adjacent areas. Winter snow cover was mild, which may have caused part of the mortality due to poor insulation or moisture loss from the substrate. Some plants appeared dead when examined in early spring, but had revived by early summer. Those that spread—Yarrow, Black-eyed Susan, Ox-eye Daisy, Evening Primrose—are recommended for further study for critical slope stabilization.

The response of the highway trial was slightly different, with all but 5 species surviving. Dame's Rocket and Purple Coneflower were not successful survivors in this trial. The slope is steep and sandy, with little cover besides mosses, and the weather was hot and dry when the sods were set out. Water was applied weekly for three weeks after planting but conditions were extreme. The number rooted and alive decreased more than expected, but the winter

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appearances may not be a true indication of survival or death. There was no indication of spreading into adjacent areas at the last examination (December, 1979).

Wildflower sods can be easily prepared using the techniques described here, although a root binder and high seed densities are required. The binder material can be plastic or cloth netting, with little differences in sod stability between them if roots are given sufficient time to develop. Eight weeks was sufficient time for fine netted cloth, but loose netted plastic may require a longer development period. The binder material serves an additional use when planting on slopes, since excess binder can be covered with soil to help retain the sod and soil adjacent to the sod.

The tap-rooted varieties, Butterfly Milkweed and Spiked Gayfeather, were most difficult to establish and handle as sods, and were not completely satisfactory. Sods of Black-eyed Susan, Ox-eye Daisy, Evening Primrose and Yarrow were first to become established and spread into adjacent areas, by seed or root growth. If suitable, these would be the first varieties to attempt for sodding roadside slopes, although other varieties may be more suitable in different areas.

Time of planting and weather (moisture) conditions may be more critical than sodding method or plant species. The sods can be treated as a container crop,

fertilized, hardened off before planting, or held for periods of time until planting conditions are favorable. Flowering may occur before transplanting with Black-eyed Susan, but no apparent setback was noticed in these trials. The sods were easily handled and could be cut into smaller sections to fit small spaces or spread more effectively on slopes. Wildflowers may be established quickly and easily with this sodding method, which may provide the nucleus for establishing larger colonies on inaccessible areas or other areas needing low maintenance and colorful display.

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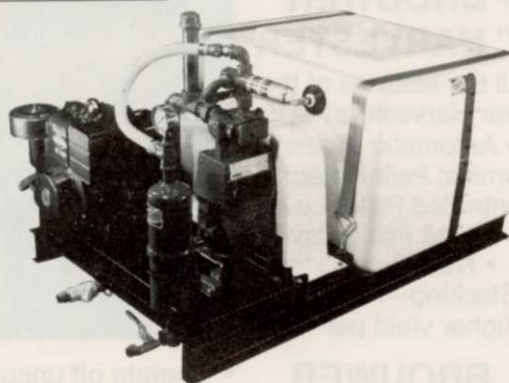
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