

On insuring wildflower germination

The interest in and availability of wildflower seed has increased greatly in recent years. Unfortunately, there are numerous misconceptions about what constitutes the best mixtures to use and how to establish and maintain them properly. In addition, the landscaper should be aware of the "state of the art" in the seed industry in order to make logical and economical decisions.

The use of wildflowers can be divided into two general categories: 1) ornamental landscaping by professional landscapers, homeowners and landscape management personnel, and 2) reclamation, or by mining and construction companies and highway departments. Although these usages are similar in many ways, there are some factors that are unique to each category.

The right seed

First of all, to insure that you are getting the most for your money, buy wildflower seed that is of high quality. Seed should meet state standards for germination, have high purity (more than 95 percent) and contain no noxious weed seeds.

The composition of the mixture is a critical factor. Many companies sell regionalized seed mixtures and making the best selection will require

some research. The most desirable regionalized mixtures contain annuals and perennials that are either native or have become naturalized in that particular region.

Native/naturalized annuals are highly desirable because they provide color for long periods during the growing season and may reseed year after year if growing conditions are suitable.

Unfortunately, a limited number of annual species of wildflowers exist in nature throughout most of North America. Notable exceptions include the regions west of the Sierra and Cascade Mountains in California, Oregon and Washington, and the states bordering the Gulf of Mexico. For this reason, most seed companies offer regional mixtures that contain non-native or non-naturalized annuals.

Annuals are essential

These annuals are essential in ornamental landscaping because they provide a colorful display the first year and they act as a nurse crop for the slower-developing perennials. Without annuals in mixtures, most plantings of perennials will be overrun with weeds in the first season.

Also important in ornamental

landscaping are height restrictions. Because tall wildflower mixtures tend to look unkept or too wild, low-growing mixtures have been in great demand in suburban and urban settings. Mowing in the fall eliminates tall, dead flowering stalks and helps disperse the seed. Very low-growing mixtures (10 inches or less) do not require fall mowing.

For best results, approach a wildflower planting as you would a garden. Throwing seed out into an area with established vegetation rarely produces a meadow of flowers. Start with bare soil that has been tilled. Water the soil thoroughly, allow weed seeds to germinate, then spray them with Roundup or Kleenup. Rake out the debris. For added protection, repeat this procedure one more time, without tilling the soil again.

If seed is broadcast, rake or drag the area lightly. For large areas, drilling or hydroseeding may be appropriate. Moisture during the early stages is critical. Do not allow the seedbed to dry out for at least four to six weeks. To keep wildflowers at their peak, supplemental watering of up to 1/2 inch per week may be required, especially in hot, dry weather.

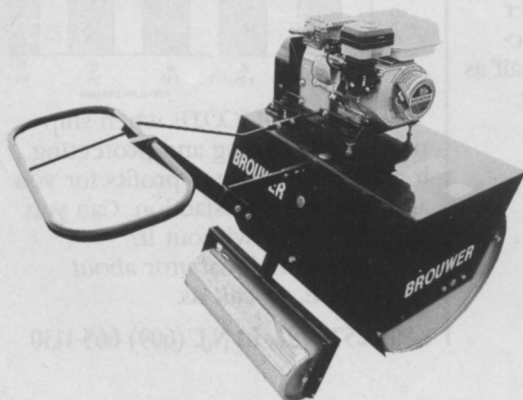
A second method

Here is an alternative planting method to consider when weeds are a major problem: First spray existing vegetation with Roundup or Kleenup. When vegetation is dead, use a slit-seeder to sow seed directly into the soil. This method eliminates tilling the soil, which often brings many weed seeds up to the surface.

Until wildflowers are well established, weed control is important and may be an ongoing activity for at least two growing seasons. Once you can identify the weeds, cutting, spot-spraying and/or hand pulling of weeds are effective ways to eliminate them.

In summary, when purchasing wildflower seed for ornamental landscaping, select high quality mixtures with the most desirable species for the area. Use native or naturalized species whenever possible, with some annuals as a nurse crop. Sow seed on prepared soil. Moisture and weed control are very important. Using these guidelines will insure your success with wildflowers. **LM**

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