

Wildflower benefits always in bloom

by Diane Wilson, ecologist, Applewood Seed Company

Mike Kropp, grounds maintenance superintendent for the City of Rock Hill, S.C., once decided to plant wildflowers in narrow medians too small to mow safely. The tactic worked.

The wildflowers, which he obtained from Applewood Seed Co., provided bright color during the spring and summer and resulted in a substantial cost savings for the city.

Kropp views flowers as a safe and economical adjunct to turf. "For every dollar spent (on wildflowers), we save an estimated \$3."

Wildflowers are great additions to out-of-play areas, knolls between greens, doglegs on fairways, in the roughs and near tees.

Mike Kosak, superintendent at Forest Highlands in Flagstaff, Ariz., developed a seed mix of wild grasses combined with five percent of Applewood's mountain mix.

"The response was overwhelming," says Kosak. "People notice the wildflowers even more than they notice the greens."

Mark Raab, ground supervisor of Maryland's Howard County Bureau of Parks, claims that in addition to a substantial increase in wildlife, maintenance costs have been reduced "substantially" since he's planted wildflower meadows. Cost cutting results in less fertilizer, herbicide, labor and equipment use. "Our costs in 1987 for maintaining turf was \$690 per acre per year, versus \$31 per acre for wildflowers. The only maintenance performed on our meadows is mowing once per year," says Raab.

Steps to establishment

To achieve good wildflower establishment, Raab first uses Roundup to clear the area of vegetation. Dead plants are mowed low and raked off. A rake or power dethatcher is then used to scarify the soil down to a depth of about ¼-inch. The seed is mixed with a bulking agent such as sand, Turface or kitty litter. One part seed to three parts bulking agent is a satisfactory ratio.

The seed/bulking agent mix is sown with a hand-held rotary spreader. Seed is lightly raked into the soil, or a power dethatcher may be used in large areas.

Fiachra, a large landscaping firm with many northeast offices, has hydroseeded Applewood's wildflower seed in numerous projects.

"Commercial customers and resi-



Wildflowers provide scenic refreshment between play at the Port Ludlow Golf Course, Port Ludlow, WA.

dential developers will generally use wildflowers in buffer areas or intermediate zones found between the formal landscaped area and a property line or stand of woods," says Carole D'Adamo of Fiachra.

"Retention basins have also been used for wildflower locations," she adds. "It's been an aesthetic alternative to the traditional grass vegetation usually found in these areas."

Two-step hydroseeding

According to D'Adamo, wildflower seed should be hydroseeded differently than grass seed.

"The planting method used in hydroseeding is a two-step process," she says. "First, the seed is sprayed on with a minimal amount of fiber mulch, just enough for marking purposes. After it has had time to dry, a second application is sprayed on with mulch, tackifier and 0-36-0 plus sulfur fertilizer. The total amount of mulch used is 1200 lbs./acre with only about 300 lbs. used in the first application. Due to the small and somewhat fragile characteristics of wildflower seed, it is important to get seed to soil contact.

"If the full complement of mulch were used in one application, a lot of the seed would get tied up in the paper mulch and never have a chance to germinate."

Blending in

Barb Steinmeyer of Habitat Landscapes, Inc., Aurora, Colo., has a large clientele from a residential neighborhood with extensive areas of native vegetation such as scrub oak and ponderosa pine. Her customers wanted to try wildflowers because traditional plantings would look out of place. "Customers like the masses of different colors," states Steinmeyer, "and they like the fact that they blend in with the rest of the natural environment."

Steinmeyer reseeds during the second and third years with an annual/perennial mixture at one-half the original planting rate.

Reseeding the second and third year helps to control weeds, cover bare spots, and provide additional color from the annuals. Perennial wildflowers usually attain their full growth and begin to bloom in 2-3 years. **LM**