

Six steps for wildflower success

■ The right reasons for establishing wildflower areas in the landscape:

● Once established, they require less care and watering, and virtually no fertilizing or trimming.

● Typically, they're mowed just once, when their color fades at the end of the season.

● But of course, the biggest reason is beauty, often year after year.

These virtues make wildflowers well suited for golf course roughs, highway medians and roadsides, hill-sides and, increasingly, in and around industrial/commercial properties. Even homeowners are looking at wildflowers with fresh enthusiasm. Homeowner sales jump when the public sees wildflowers along a highway or at a golf course.

But some people have the mistaken belief that all you have to do to establish wildflowers is scatter or plant the seeds and let them take care of themselves. Usually, they won't. Wildflowers do not compete well against weeds.

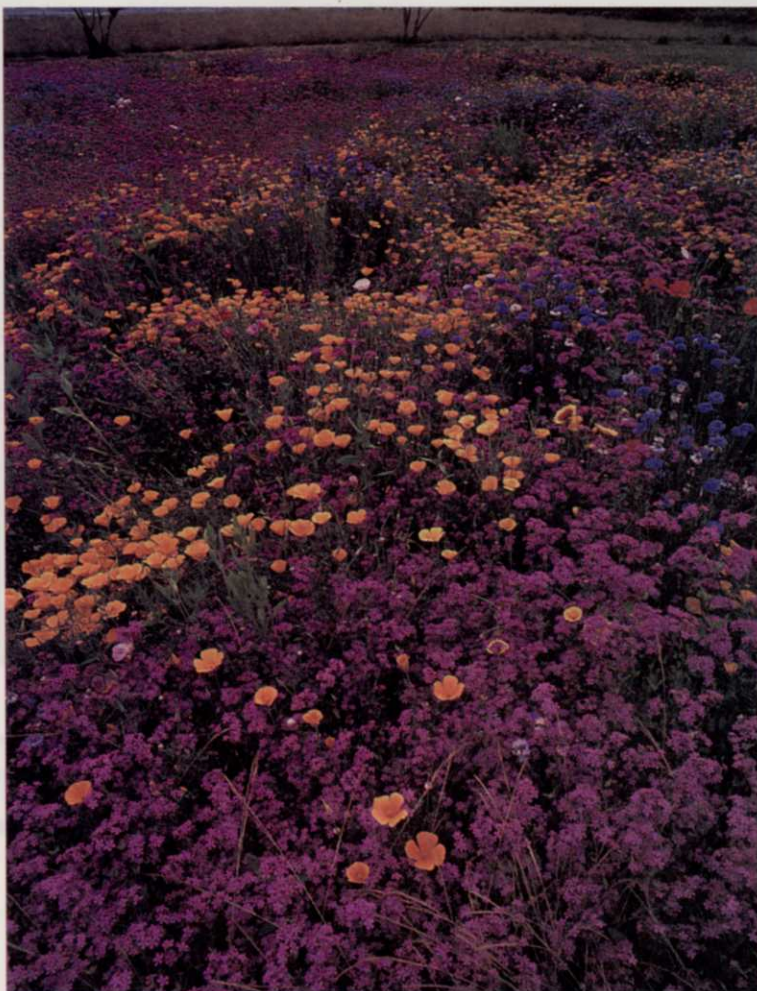
Quite simply: plant a wildflower area as thoughtfully as you'd plant any other type of garden.

1) Site selection—

Wildflowers perform best in moderately fertile soils with good moisture-holding capacities. Don't expect wildflowers to prosper in areas that won't support other types of vegetation.

2) Planting times—Rainfall and climate determine planting times, but generally it's best to plant in either the spring or fall. In cold climates, if you plant in the fall, plant late enough so seeds won't germinate. In mild climates, fall plantings give annuals a head start the following spring. Moisture for four to six weeks after planting is critical regardless of the climate.

3) Weed control—Remove existing weeds by tilling, pulling or using a general herbicide. If weeds are numerous you might need to remove the weeds, irrigate the area to germinate weeds seeds on or



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near the surface, then kill/remove this next crop of weeds. In fact, you might have to do this several times.

4) Soil preparation—Prepare a loose seed bed or, if this is impossible, at least scarify the top surface of the soil. Cover the seed by $1/8$ to $1/4$ inch of soil by raking the area lightly. Caution: don't cover the seed too deeply.

5) Rainfall & irrigation—If your area gets at least 30 inches of rainfall per year, you'll probably have to irrigate only in

drought emergencies. If you get less rainfall, you'll have to irrigate more often; about $1/2$ inch per week is the rule.

6) Maintenance—Weed and irrigate as needed, particularly as the wildflowers become established. Some landscape managers mow their wildflowers in the fall. Also, it may be necessary to re-seed a wildflower area for a year or two, at about half the original seeding rate. Perennial wildflowers usually take two to three years to attain their full growth.

(For more immediate wildflower results, a relatively new product is pre-established wildflowers, wildflower "sod," on 5-sq.-ft. mats, plants that have already been grown to about 3 inches high. Denver-based Wildflower Carpet, Inc. says it's establishing dealers across the country to pallet-ship "carpet" from growers directly to users. Cost, of course, is greater than seeding.)

Technically speaking, many wildflowers aren't so wild anymore. Many species are now grown in fields like other seed crops, but usually on a much smaller scale. Some wildflowers are prolific seed producers, others aren't. Weather and market conditions also influence the availability (and price) of specific wildflower seed.

Wildflower seed producers and suppliers now offer an astonishing selection of bloomers.

The most natural and long-lasting displays result from mixtures of annual and perennial species that are well-adapted to local growing conditions.

Most suppliers can recommend appropriate, if not entirely native, seed mixtures for every area of the country. In many cases, they're also able to custom blend wildflower seed to meet specific customer demands.

For more information about wildflowers, write: National Wildflower Research Center, 2600 FM 973 North, Austin, TX 78725-4201; or phone (512) 929-3600.

(Bloomers Wildflower Mixture from Turf-Seed Inc. Photo by Larry Kassell.)