

Success with Wildflowers

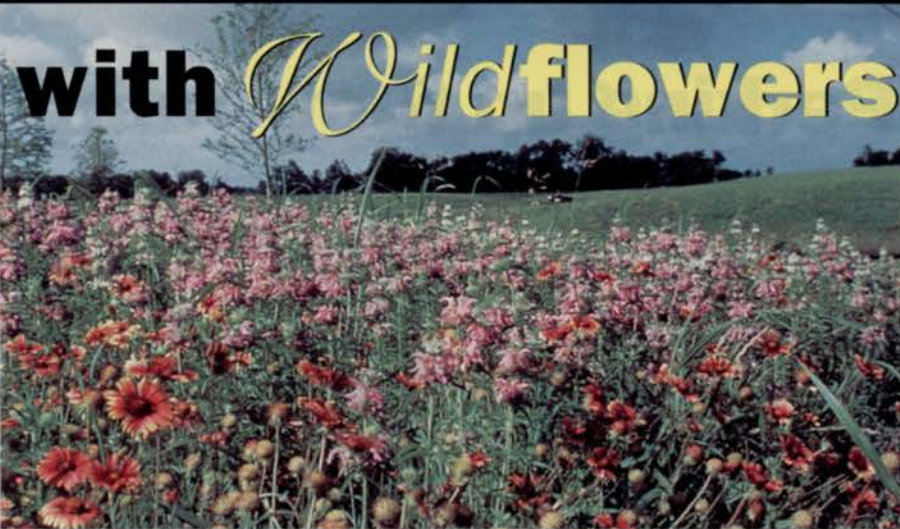
Growing wildflowers can be the most exciting kind of landscape enhancement imaginable.

■ Whether you plant wildflowers in huge swaths along roadsides or in tiny pocket gardens in your customers' backyards, the vibrant colors and rich textures of these hardy plants are sure to please the eye.

Like any kind of landscaping, wildflowers require work and planning, but following these few basic rules will assure your success:

1) Determine your goals. Before you buy seed, first know what you want from your wildflower plantings. What is your purpose? Do you want three-season color? Textured plants for a winterscape? Only species native to your area? Are you planting to attract birds and butterflies?

2) Choose the appropriate site. Although it may be tempting to plant wildflowers in a difficult site where nothing else grows, first stop to consider why this is the case. Wildflowers are hardy, but they're not magical. Most wildflowers need full sun and moderately fertile soils that drain well but not too quickly. While it's possible to plant wildflowers in poor soil on a steep



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slope in the shade, this presents a special challenge.

3) Choose the right seeds. Your wildflowers will only be as good as the seeds you sow. If you invest the time and energy to plant wildflowers correctly, don't ruin the project by using questionable seeds. Buy from a reputable dealer who can supply you with information about individual species and different kinds of mixtures. Most mixtures include a combination of annuals and perennials. In general, mixtures for warm climates may include more annuals because they tend to reseed year after year. Cold-climate mixtures should contain fewer annuals because they will not readily reseed. Annuals should be included in almost every mixture, however, since they act as a nurse crop for the slower growing perennials which do not bloom until the second or third year.

4) Prepare the site properly. It's highly recommended that you remove existing vegetation before you plant wildflower seeds. Till, if you can, to create a loose seedbed. If you can't till, at least scarify the top surface of the soil. You must eliminate weed seeds in the upper layer of soil by allowing them to germinate and begin to grow. The weeds should then be removed by chemical or mechanical means. Don't till again, or you may turn up new weed seeds and you'll have to repeat the process.

5) Plant the seed. Good seed-to-soil contact is essential for a high germination rate. For even distribution, mix seeds with

sand, vermiculite or cornmeal. Scatter the seeds and rake them in lightly, being careful not to cover too deep.

Determining the best time to plant is important to the success of the project. Optimum planting times vary with climate and rainfall. Fall plantings offer the advantage of early germination and growth. In mild climates, plant before expected periods of rainfall. In cold climates, plant late enough so the seeds will not germinate until spring. A spring or early summer planting is also fine in most areas. Supplemental watering may be necessary for the first several weeks.

6) Water sufficiently. Many wildflowers are considered to be drought-tolerant, but all plants—wildflowers included—need sufficient moisture to germinate and thrive. Tell customers to keep the site evenly moist during the first four to six weeks, then gradually reduce waterings. If your area receives at least 30 inches of rainfall a year, supplemental waterings probably will be unnecessary after this initial period. If you receive less than 30 inches a year, tell customers to supply one-half inch of moisture each week.

7) Maintain the area. Wildflower plantings need to be mowed once, usually in late fall. The cut material may be raked or left in place to serve as a protective mulch. Overseed any bare spots, as needed, with one-half the normal seeding rate. If you weed regularly, irrigate during periods of drought and mow once a year, wildflowers will reward your clients with season after season of beauty and fragrance.

—Questions, comments and requests for a list of seed suppliers may be addressed to the Wildflower Group, A.S.T.A., 601 13th St. NW, Suite 570 South, Washington, DC 20005-1593.

