

WILDFLOWERS CAN ENHANCE LANDSCAPES & GARDENS

Plan, plan, then plan some more to match
wildflower seed mix to your backyard

By Rex Lockman

Wildflower areas paint a wonderful “wow!” across gardens or landscapes if the areas are planned and well-designed.

When planning and designing a wildflower garden, ask:

- Are the flowers in the seed mix native to your area?
- Are there species that could become weeds?
- Are the wildflowers suited to your soil type?
- Are plants included that are poisonous to horses or livestock? Even native plants can be toxic.
- What will I need to do to plant them and give them the best chances for success?

Planning Increases Success

Many wildflowers are adapted to full sun so sunny locations will support a greater variety of wildflowers. Can the area be irrigated with sprinklers or other means? Supplemental water can be helpful in getting seed mixes germinated. Is the area easy to weed? There may be quite a bit of weeding until the plants are established. Are there existing weeds? Perennial weeds may take several years of control before establishing a wildflower area.

Determine the soil type. Send a sample to the Colorado State

University Soil Lab (instructions at <http://www.soiltestinglab.colostate.edu/>) or other regional labs (see your local UW Extension office for information about labs in your area). Selecting a flower mix compatible with the soil type and the precipitation amount your area receives will increase planting success.

Selecting the seed mix can be tedious. The home and garden stores often carry a variety of wildflower mixes, and options are endless on the Internet. The big box home and garden stores will carry a mix made for the store’s regional headquarters’ area, and it may or may not suit where you actually live. In Cheyenne, many of these stores are based out of the Denver region, which is a USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 5, while Cheyenne is a Zone 4. Some of the plants in the mix will probably not survive winter.

Beware of Nuisance Flowers

Does the mix list the species? Some flowers can become a nuisance. We planted some poppies in a little bed adjacent to the lawn until they escaped and got into the lawn. If you have livestock, be careful there are no poisonous plants in the mix. Larkspur (*Delphinium sp.*) is a native flower to Wyoming, but millions of dollars have been spent to keep the



pest out of pastures due to its toxicity to livestock.

A good reference for poisonous plants is at www.ars.usda.gov. Type Bulletin 415 in the search box. Another option is to find a company and order the seed of the selected flowers and create a custom mix.

Winter is a great time for planning a mix – there is often more time to research options. This is also a time when a local weed and pest control district office isn't as busy. A brief visit with your seed list can help determine if there are any problematic plants.

Seeding the Bed

Correct planting prevents wasting time and money. First, prepare the area. Any problematic perennial weeds, such as Canada thistle and bindweed, should be controlled before doing anything. Disturbing these areas (such as tilling) with these weeds present will spread them throughout the area.

Kill them first.

After these weeds are controlled and if there is any other existing vegetation, till the area in the fall and let

it lay over the winter. Till again in the spring just before seeding. This should kill most of the vegetation (it will not kill rhizomatous grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, which will resprout). The other option is to spray the area with the herbicide glyphosate* in the spring then wait two weeks, till, and plant. Actual seeding time will vary across the state from mid-April to late May, and some native species such as many penstemons require a moist, cold period of many weeks – so sowing those species in the fall can give better results. Call a local conservation district or UW Extension office if unsure when to sow.

Guard Against Weeds

A moist soil is critical in getting many plant seeds germinated. If there isn't sufficient precipitation, provide some water. Be vigilant about weeding. Weeds like disturbed soil, and the dormant weed seed in the soils will now start to germinate. Weeds are often weeds because they are vigorous growers. Left to their own devices, they can quickly overwhelm desirable plants. Know what the seedling form of the flowers looks like (which can

often vary significantly from the mature plants) and know what the weed seedlings in the area look like. This will help differentiate between the weeds and your flowers.

After your flowers are established, the area will require maintenance over time to look its best. Planning the seed mix well will help flowers reach and maintain a happy equilibrium for a while. Don't be surprised if certain species of wildflowers out-compete others over time.

**Note: When using any pesticide, read all directions and warnings.*

MORE WILDFLOWER INFORMATION

Landscaping: Herbaceous Perennials for Wyoming has seedbed planning, preparation, watering, and weed suggestions. Go to barnyard-sandbackyards.com, click on Resources on the left-hand side, then Landscaping. Look under Perennials & annuals.

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