

Start a wildflower planting from seed

BY JENNY THOMPSON

Wildflowers provide food to bees and other pollinators.

Pollen provides bees (native and introduced) with protein and other nutrients that help them lay eggs and raise their young. Nectar provides energy to bees and their offspring.

Wildflower plantings require careful planning, preparation and follow-up to be successful (not to mention a little precipitation if you're doing a dry-land planting).

Here are some tips to consider as you think about a wildflower planting.

Weed Control

- Control weeds as much as possible before you plant. Avoid planting areas with large weed “seed banks” in the soil. Know what weeds are in the area, how long they've likely been producing seed there and how easy they are to kill. It can take over a year to get really weedy areas ready to plant. Weed control is critical, but controlling weeds amongst desirable wildflower species in large areas can be difficult.
- If you use an herbicide, make sure you know whether it has a residual period during which it may kill emerging wildflower seedlings.

Buying Seed

- Know what you are getting. Wildflower mixes often contain non-native species or native species that may spread beyond the area planted. Nature is never static. In long-term plantings some wildflowers will outcompete others, and the number of each kind of plant will vary over the years.
- You may need to place your seed order early to get what you want. Quality wildflower seed of species native to your area can be expensive, and demand often outstrips supply.
- Consider adding some bunch grasses for bumble bee nesting habitat, weed competition and ground cover.

- Remember, some wildflowers (such as larkspur and lupine) can be toxic to livestock if eaten.
- Include a variety of species that will bloom in spring, summer and late summer/fall to provide a long foraging season for pollinators.

Planting and Germination

- Plant in fall. Generally, the best time is when temperatures stay cool enough to keep seed from sprouting before winter. Fall usually brings adequate precipitation, and cold stratification over winter increases the germination of some species.
- Water in spring. Late winter/spring moisture is critical for germination – plantings are more likely to succeed when some supplemental irrigation is possible if needed.
- If you live in an area with reliable late spring moisture or you can supply water, spring planting may work for you.
- Find pictures of seedlings of the wildflowers so you will be able to tell friend from foe when they germinate.
- Be patient. Some native wildflower seed may not germinate for two or more years after planting, and weed control can be a challenge during this period.
- Consider wildflower transplants. If the area you want to plant is small and you want to know exactly what you're getting, transplants might be the way to go. Small transplants may be hard to find, and this is usually a more expensive option unless you start the transplants yourself. These plants will need care, such as adequate water, for the first couple of years while they get established.

Take Care or Take Another Tack

- Wildflower plantings usually require ongoing effort, so bite off only as much as you can chew. Poorly planned and maintained plantings may become a weed fest.
- Think twice before planting in areas where existing native vegetation is in reasonable shape. Instead, consider managing the area in a way that promotes native plant health. The bees will thank you for it!

Wildflower Questions?

Consult your local UW Extension, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Weed and Pest or Conservation District office.

Find more information about pollinators in Barnyards & Backyards magazine and “Promoting Pollinators on Your Place – A Wyoming Guide,” out this spring!

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