

Wildflower World

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ESTABLISHING A WILDFLOWER MEADOW

Site preparation is the most important factor when establishing a wildflower meadow.

Follow these steps for a wonderful and successful garden.

Area

Wildflowers can be planted in just a few square metres, in drifts throughout any normal garden situation, or in large open meadows. A reasonably accurate knowledge of the size of the area helps before ordering the seed. The area need not be flat - it could be a boundary bank, a bank sloping down or away from a normal lawn or any steep ground, as long as it is easily accessible. Be careful of steep banks which could be prone to "wash off" in heavy rain. These areas can be terraced to prevent seed loss. Best sites are those that are sheltered and receive at least 5 hours sun or more per day.

**** Hot Tip:** Choose an area where you'll see the flowers regularly. Areas close to the house are wonderful so you can get to them easily to enjoy. Make a small path into the area and place a seat there - wonderfully relaxing at the end of a busy day!

Soil Type

You will get the best results by growing wildflowers in soils that have a reasonable to good fertility status and are well drained and reasonably friable. Have a look at what is growing either on or around the area you are considering. If nothing is growing, not even weeds, or it is very sparse vegetation, there is a problem. If nothing grows on the site then wildflowers won't either! If on the other hand there is lush weeds, clover or docks then these are good signs of fertility.

Fertilizing the area either prior to or during the growing of wildflowers is not usually recommended - it only encourages weed growth. Most usual garden situations are great for growing wildflowers. Keep away from soils that are likely to waterlog or flood.

**** Hot Tip:** If soil is a heavy, yellow-brown or grey clay that stays wet, damp and cold over the winter, then go for a late spring sowing. Don't sow these areas in autumn or early spring. An application of lime (as per rates below) will help this soil type. If it is practical blending in a thin layer of black compost into the surface zone will greatly improve germination.

**** Hot Tip:** If you think the soil is 'hungry' by what is growing on it, then apply some general lime before cultivating. 50 grams of lime per square metre is a good start point.

Climate\When to Sow

Most wildflowers love a good deal of sunshine - for best results at least five hours per day. For early spring flowering sow in autumn before the weather cools so they will germinate, over-winter as young seedlings and then burst into flower in early spring. If sowing in spring then wait until all risk of frost is gone - anytime from early to late spring depending on local climatic conditions. Wildflowers can also be sown in summer as long as water is available. Optimum germination for most seed will be 15 degrees centigrade consistently at soil surface level. **Prolonged periods of cold or wet conditions below this temperature range will significantly affect germination.**

**** Hot Tip:** Ask an experienced local gardener or farmer when is the best time in your region for sowing an autumn or spring lawn. The best time will be the same for wildflowers and so use this as a guide.

Soil Preparation

For best results seed must be sown into a weed free, bare earth situation - it is imperative that you spend time getting the area totally weed free. A site preparation regime for getting a weedy or grassy area ready would be:

- * spray off with glyphosate such as Roundup and allow to yellow or brown off
 - * cut by mowing or line trimming dead or dying grasses and weeds down to ground level.
- If you have a mass of trash on the soil surface you may have to remove it for ease of soil cultivation or to get rid of the weed seeds in it.

- * lightly cultivate soil to a good crumbly tilth, say 50-70 mm for sandy loams and 70-100 for clay soils
- * allow weeds\grasses to colonise area again to a green sward of around 5-10 cm high
- * spray again
- * lightly cultivate soil surface again lightly (no deeper than before) for a good sowing bed. The least disturbance the better.

Note: even if you start several months ahead getting your site weed free it will give the best results and well worth the extra effort. On steep banks use a strong steel rake to achieve a 25 mm cut along the contour lines.

**** Hot Tip:** *A crumbly tilth means just that - very important for heavy clays. Tine harrows are a good, quick way to cultivate a friable loam rather than rotary hoeing, as are ripping tines for rocky or stony soils.*

**** Hot Tip:** *There are cheaper chemicals identical to 'Roundup' on the market now. Check with your local supplier.*

**** Hot Tip:** *You can knock out 'second growth' weed seedlings mechanically with a light cultivation. Do it on a hot day so that the weeds just burn up and die.*

Sowing Seed

For an even and maximum distribution of seed a carrier or distribution agent is essential to mix with the seed - use at least 15 -20 parts by volume of inert material to 1 part of seed. The following materials can be used –river (not sea) sand, propagating sand, vermiculite or potting mix. Fine (3mm) grade pumice or propagating sand is excellent and bags can be bought at most garden centres. Carrier agent must be **DRY** so you may have to put it out in the sun to dry before use. Place everything in a clean container and stir until well mixed. Hand broadcast the seed as uniformly as possible. If you wish very lightly rake the seed into the soil but note that a light watering or shower of rain has the same effect. Do not cover the seed any deeper than 2-3 mm - this will endanger successful germination and is the main cause for seeds not germinating.

**** Hot Tip:** *Use a Cyclone hand-held fertiliser or seed spreader for big areas. Well worth the \$30-40 investment. Practice first with this using just the carrier agent only to get a feel of the coverage. Try to cover most of the area first with half the seed and then go back over with the remaining seed in an opposite direction. This will ensure good, even coverage. If there is a light wind blowing, sow with it. If it's blowing a gale, sow tomorrow!*

Water & Aftercare

Wildflower seeds require ample moisture to germinate but then usually can survive with minimum rainfall and should not need extra watering once established. For best results the area should be reasonably moist for 4-6 weeks during the establishment period. You may have to supplement water with hosing or irrigation if you strike a dry period in this 4-6 weeks. Major weeds that re-appear can be pulled by hand or spot sprayed during early stages of growth. Keep edges clean to stop weeds seeding into the wildflower bed.

If there is excessive competition from grasses a selective herbicide called "Gallant" can be sprayed over the bed to kill just the grasses. This chemical is available from most farm supply merchandisers. Use it strictly to label recommendations - it works best on young grasses.

**** HotTip:** *If you have to apply water, do so late in the late afternoon or early evening. Water applied during the day is likely to get dried out by the sun's heat.*

After Flowering

Allow at least 3 weeks after flowering has passed for seeds to mature. When there is around 10-20% flowers left then the area can be trimmed or mown down to ground level to a fine trash. Leave the trimmings on the ground to disperse their seed for next season. A good general clean-up at this time is important - remove any weeds and if possible lightly till the soil to encourage new seed growth. This can be achieved by a very light rotary hoe or by breaking the soil with tine harrows. However, if you assess that there is an unacceptable percentage of weeds, then spray out the whole bed before cutting, allow to yellow or brown off then cut down. Cultivate as above. Monitor to see if the re-growth is wildflowers or weeds. If it is mainly weeds then spray out them again. After cleanup a badly weed infested bed will require more wildflower seed - at least 50% of the original or maybe even a complete re-sow. These can just be gently raked in.

Over time, some varieties will become more dominant than others, due to local conditions.

How to Determine How Much Seed you will Need

When sowing large areas there are many variables on how much seed to use. In general, if the area has been well cleaned up with time and attention put into the preparation, and if water is available during the germination process, then you can go for a low sowing rate i.e. 600 grams to cover 800 square metres. If the area has not had so much attention to preparation, if it is a really tough and difficult site or if it is unable to have water applied, then go for a heavier sowing rate, i.e. 600 grams to cover 600 square metres.

Here's how I work out a sowing rate for a big area.

Example One: good soil, well drained that has been sprayed twice with a light cultivation in between sprays. Now it's prime sowing time so I'll use my seed to cover the maximum area i.e. 600 grams for 800 square metres.

Example Two: A tough clay that I've only quickly cleaned up. It is grass and weed free but I've only sprayed and cultivated once. I'll sow this area at a heavier rate, i.e. 600 grams for 600 square metres to help get a mass of wildflowers to help beat and smother the weeds.

If you have any queries on care and maintenance for your wildflower meadow, please contact us - we are more than happy to help you out in whatever way we can.

Happy wildflower growing.

**Geoff & Liz Brunsten
Wildflower World**