

How to Create Your Own Wildflower Meadow

Spring Planting: Most wildflower meadows are installed in spring, simply because that is when most gardening happens. To plant in spring, timing is important. The earliest possible time is about one week before you'd put out tomato seedlings in your area. In other words, as the seed packets have always said, "when danger of frost is past." But there are other important considerations. If you're like most meadow gardeners, once you clear your ground by tilling or any other method, you'll want to sow your seed immediately thereafter — if possible on the same day, surely the one after. You can't till the area one weekend, and seed the next. Here's the reason. The minute you open the ground, you turn up weed seeds that are in all soil. If you wait before putting in your flower seed, those weed seeds have an important "jump" on the flowers. They may become quickly dominant over the flower seed as your meadow area grows. By putting the flower seed in quickly, you at least give your flowers a "level playing field" with the grasses and weeds that are sure to grow up with them.

Spring Planting Advantage: If you're willing to do a little more work and exercise some patience, there is a way to eradicate or at least greatly reduce your weed population before you sow your flower seed. This is one of the big advantages of spring planting over fall. The idea is to clear the ground, do not sow seed, but instead begin immediately to encourage weed growth as quickly as you can. This means watering if it's dry, and watching closely. After about two weeks, you'll see green seedlings popping up, and you'll know at least the early germinating seed population of your soil. Wait as long as you can (this usually depends on weather, and how early you got started), and once you have a good idea of what you're dealing with, you're ready to kill those young weeds and spread your flower seed. There are several ways to proceed. Many use a herbicide like Round-Up. Others have been known to lay wet newspaper on the weeds to smother them, but this is not surefire and takes longer. At this point, you must resist heavy raking or tilling again, because if you do, you'll turn up fresh weed seeds which will begin their sprouting process, starting the whole cycle over again. In other words, at this point, you must kill the weed seedlings you see, but NOT disturb the soil again. Once your soil is clear, sow your wildflower seed, and it will grow in what is probably the most weed-free situation possible. Nothing is perfect, and of course, over time, weeds and grasses will invade. But this method gives your flower meadow the best possible start. Obviously, there are several disadvantages. First, it takes time. Second, it usually requires more watering once your flowers sprout, since you're farther along into the season, and spring moisture has subsided. Thirdly, bloom is delayed, compared to when it would have begun if you had seeded when you first cleared the ground. But if you're serious about installing the best-ever meadow, all this is worth it.

Choosing a Site: First, you'll need to choose a place for your wildflower area. If you're planting an entire field of several acres, the decision is easy. If you're putting in a smaller area, there are several things to consider. Wildflowers look best in a semi-natural spot. Along a wood-line at the back of your lot, for example, or in a free-form area against a fence, bordered in front by lawn or the patio. Some homeowners plant wildflowers between the driveway and lot-line, giving one complete part of the former lawn over to nature. For all but our partial shade mixture, choose a sunny spot. When picking a spot to plant wildflowers, the sunnier the spot, the better. After all, think about the beautiful meadows you've seen in nature; they're always open and sunny. The only absolute requirement is good drainage. This means a place where water does not stand after a rain. Speaking of moisture, it is good to have your wildflower area within easy reach of your garden hose. Of course, with large plantings, this may be impossible, but if you have a choice, you'll appreciate having a water source nearby when you install your meadow and later on when things get very dry. After wildflowers are up and growing, many people mow a charming, curving path through their meadow area, so everything can be observed "up close." Next, usually comes bird feeding stations, birdbaths, and perhaps a bench somewhere along the path at a favorite spot.

Your Soil: Unless your soil is actually sterile, which is rare, it is recommended that you use your soil as you find it. Wildflowers, as we see on every roadside, are extremely adaptable. Of course, if yours is heavy clay, you can till in sand to loosen it. And if it is sandy, you can till in some humus to make it heavier and more moisture-retentive. But the test is simple. If anything is growing in the area — even if it's just grasses or weeds — the area should support wildflowers with the soil just as you found it. If it's a problem area where nothing grows, you need a new site. Wildflowers may be adaptable, but they're not magic. They won't grow on a sterile site any better than anything else.

Soil Preparation: Clearing the Ground: This subject is all-important to your meadow's success. You must clear your area of all existing growth. For a small area, the project is the same as preparing for a new vegetable garden, and a shovel is usually all that is needed. Simply dig out everything that's growing there, turn the soil, and rake the area flat and free from rocks and roots. (By the way, here's one advantage of meadow gardening over vegetable gardening. A few rocks and some uneven spots won't bother a wildflower planting, so there's usually less to do.) But old grass roots are important — be sure to remove them or they'll grow back along with your new flower plants. For larger areas, usually a rototiller is used to bare the ground. It's important to "till" only as deep as necessary to remove old roots — don't dig deep just

because you can. The deeper you till, the more dormant weed seeds you'll turn up near the surface where they can sprout along with your wildflowers. If your area has been an old field that has grown and seeded itself for years, expect plenty of weed seeds in the soil. If you're tilling a lawn that's been mowed for years, chances are your weed seed count will be low. Careful rototilling works well for three reasons. It opens the soil and allows a "soft" space for emerging flower plants. It creates a good seedbed for germination and promotes good "seed-to-soil" contact. And, of course, it removes almost all the existing grasses and weeds which would otherwise compete with your seedlings. Unless you're trying to create a prairie environment, which includes certain grasses, it's important to understand that grasses and weeds are the enemy in establishing a wildflower meadow. Your objective is to get the flower seedlings dominant over the grasses, instead of the reverse. No matter how you work on your site, some grasses will return in time, and that's fine. After all, the "natural look" you are seeking is created by the companion growth of flowers and grasses. So success is a matter of degree: More flowers than grass plants. If you end up with the opposite, you've created a hayfield. A good tilling of the area is all most wildflower gardeners consider necessary. But if you have particularly heavy old growth, and are willing to invest a little more time, you may want to do more, including the removal of the weed seed that is in all soils. There are several ways to eradicate old weeds and grasses completely, usually involving herbicide. (See instructions about tilling, herbicide, etc. above under "Spring Planting Advantage.")

Sowing your Seed: Once your ground is bare and loose, here are a couple of tips many wildgardeners use that makes the whole process simple and successful. First, choose a nearly windless day, for obvious reasons. The Simple Split and Sand Method - Beyond simply sowing the seed as it comes from the package, many wildgardeners use this surefire method. Separate the seed you're planting, no matter the amount, into roughly two equal parts. Put the first half in a clean bucket (or coffee can, or anything else handy), and then add in roughly ten parts of light sand or vermiculite to your one part of seed. (Do not use beach sand.) There are two good reasons for the sand. First, it "dilutes" the seed and helps you spread it more evenly. More important, since it is lighter-colored than the soil, you'll be able to "see where you've been" as you sow. Once you have the sand and seed evenly mixed in your bucket, walk to your site and simply sow it. You can hand-sow as most do (practice in advance with just sand if you like.), scattering the seed mix by the handful as evenly as you can. Or you can use a hand-crank "cyclone" seeder if you're working with a large area. Sow the first half of your seed/sand mix over the WHOLE area to be seeded, as evenly as possible. Then go back, mix the second half of your seed with sand the same as the first, and then spread that half over the whole area. This is a great way to avoid bare spots.

After Sowing: Once all your seed is evenly sown, do not rake or cover it with soil. (Some species require light to germinate.) Instead, simply compress the seed into the loose, bare soil. A lawn roller does a perfect job. If your site is small, walking over the whole area, being careful to leave the area solid with footprints does just as well. Some people have been known to lay down an old sheet of plywood, and then jump on it to compress the seed into the soil. This is a very important step, since compressing the seed into soil creates all-important "seed to soil contact"-a major aid in successful seed germination.

What to expect. Every wildflower gardener watches constantly after seeding, waiting for the young plants to appear. Remember that all plants-even wildflowers-require moisture and favorable temperature range to germinate. (Cold slows them down, and intense heat can do the same.) Warm days and cool nights are best. While certain wildflower species germinate (or "sprout") in as little as eight days, other may not appear for months. A lot depends on the temperature and amount of rainfall or watering your seedbed receives. That's why we recommend you plant in anticipation of rainfall in your area, and if rains don't come, water to keep your seedbed moist until your seedlings are established. That means, usually about 4 to 6 weeks, or until the young plants are 6 to 8 inches tall. (Use a light mist or sprinkler to water newly seeded areas.)

Seed storage: If seed is not sown soon after purchase, don't worry. You can store it in any cool (not freezing) dry place that is not subject to extreme temperature variations. Viability (seed life) varies species to species, but all wildflower species in most mixtures will maintain good germination quality for at least a year or two. In fact, most are viable for 5 years or more, some for decades.