**Primetime News**

**Calvin Finch Ph.D.**

**Horticulturist and Urban Water Program Director**

**Texas A&M Institute of Renewable Natural Resources**

**“Wildflowers for Spring Color”**

 Do you have a vacant lot, dry right-of-way or other area that would benefit from wildflowers? Now is the time to plant them. Most wildflowers that bloom in the spring germinate in the autumn and develop roots over the winter.

 Wildflowers are not fussy about soil. In fact, they perform best in soils where there isn’t much competition. If your vacant lot is in full sun and has bare areas and/or rocks protruding from the soil, it is probably a good place to plant wildflowers. The seed must be able to make contact with soil in order to germinate. Sod or soil covered with a thick weed cover is not the place to plant wildflowers.

 You can prepare the soil for wildflower seeding by disking, but it is not necessary. The seed will eventually need some fall rains or other moisture to germinate, but most of us just rely on the rains.

 You have several options for seed. Most retail nurseries have special Texas mixes and some even have single variety packets. For a serious range of selections, you can visit the websites of wildflower seed retailers and select the varieties you want from their catalogs. That is also the best route to go if you need large quantities of seed. [Wildseed Farms](http://www.wildseedfarms.com/home.php) in Fredericksburg and [Douglas King Seed Co.](http://www.dkseeds.com/) in San Antonio are two of the best websites to visit.

 The full sun requirement is needed for most wildflower varieties, but there are some wildflowers that will grow in shade.

 Blue curl, *Phacelia congesta*, grows 2 feet tall on most soils with attractive foliage. The flowers are blue and are curled, as the name implies. Some gardeners call them “caterpillar” because of the flower bud arrangement. Blue curl blooms over a long period in the spring and often lasts into mid-summer.

 Another shade tolerant wildflower, *Salvia coccinea*, grows up to 18 inches tall in my neighborhood. It is upright with limited foliage and attractive red flowers that are a favorite nectar source for hummingbirds. It blooms in the fall. *Salvia coccinea* is in most Texas wildflower mixes.

 One of the wildflowers included in most seed mixes marketed for the Texas area is purple coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*, also called *Rudbeckia purpurea*. It is a perennial that spreads by seed. The plant grows from 1 foot to 2 feet tall, depending on the soil and moisture. The flower has violet-colored petals surrounding a mounded center. Purple coneflower is also one of the native plants included in our list for 12 months of native plant color.

Butterflies seek out the coneflower as a nectar source, and goldfinches and other seed eaters harvest the seeds.

 Use purple coneflower in groupings in perennial borders in addition to a showy wildflower that blooms later than most wildflowers. The seed is available in single variety packets in addition to mixes. Most nurseries sell containerized plants.

 I find coneflower to be a weak perennial in our soil and climate. Individual plants only last three to four years, which means that you will need to divide large clumps or reseed to maintain the planting. The flowers make the effort worth it.

Other wildflowers that are included in Texas mixes are verbena, primrose, poppies, bee balm, coneflower, coreopsis, Mexican hat, Indian blanket and, of course, bluebonnets. One of the advantages of a mix is that the different tolerances and preferences for moisture levels and temperatures of each variety means that, in most cases, one or more varieties will germinate well even if conditions are tough.

**“Garden Tasks”**

* It is a good time to prune back the blackberry canes that produced fruit this spring in order to make room for the new growth this fall.
* Fire ants “farm” the aphids on okra plants, which makes it difficult to harvest the okra. Control the ants by applying bait such as Amdro or Conserve (Spinosad) to the area around the garden. Spinosad-based controls can be used in the vegetable garden. Check the labels to verify.
* Plant strawberries now for a spring crop. Seascape is the recommended variety.
* Deadhead zinnias—remove spent blooms—to encourage continuous flowers through Thanskgiving.