**Wildflowers**

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Did you enjoy the wildflowers this spring? To create or enlarge a wildflower planting for next spring, the seed should be planted this fall. September is a good month to select the site and plant the seed.

Preparing the Site– You can grow wildflowers on a site enriched with organic material, fertilized and irrigated, but if you are going to go to such an effort, you may as well grow snapdragons, stocks, petunias and pansies. The attraction of wildflowers is that they survive and even prosper on sites with minimum attention. Select the right site and the right seed; apply it now so that the seed makes contact with the soil and you can expect it to respond to a minimum amount of rain and bloom next spring. Rake the soil if you need the exercise but do not cover the seed.

Selecting the Seed– I have had good luck with the Texas or Southwest mixes available at some area nurseries or from Douglas King Seed (San Antonio) or Wildseed Farms (Fredericksburg) and other internet seed services. Google them for their selection and prices.

Wildseed Farms has a particularly good website. It can be reached through Plantanswers.com.

The mixes usually include bluebonnets, poppies,, bee balm, verbena, phlox, coreopsis, wine cups, coneflowers and Mexican hat. Single variety seed can also be purchased.

Salvia coccinea and snailweed are two wildflowers that do well in the shade in my neighborhood.

Applying the Seed– The trick is to spread the seed thinly over the site. It can be done by hand or with a hand crank seed spreader. One option is to spread the mix over the main area and locate patches of your favorite varieties in selected areas.

Winter Growth– Depending on the variety, after the applied seed receives one or more rains it will germinate.

For many of the varieties, including bluebonnets, the plants lay low after germination and concentrate on growing a root system. The major top growth only occurs in February through April.

Winter Care– Normally we let nature handle this responsibility. If the site has been well selected, the tough little seedlings will hold their own against weeds, disease, insects and drought.

Naturalizing Wildflowers– It is the old story with one added dimension. If you have selected a good site (a poor site for competition!) and adopted wildflower species, the plants will reseed themselves year after year. The added dimension is that wildflowers must be allowed to mature their seed. The flowers bloom and then decline. Seed pods form. The seedpods must mature and drop their seed as the source of next year’s plants.

Plants that are cut down before they mature their seed will not produce the seed for next year’s plants! If the plants can be left intact through June, most of the seed will be distributed.

Coping with the Wildflowers’ “Ugly Period”– Does it sound easy to let the wildflowers mature and drop their seed? It obviously isn’t, because there are many examples of elaborate wildflower plantings being abandoned because of the long “ugly period” after the short bloom period in the spring.

There are some tactics to consider to better survive the “ugly period”.

Select your seed mix to include a generous supply of late-blooming wildflowers. Poppies, bee balm, coneflowers and salvia coccinea are late bloomers that can help cover the seeding period for early bloomers.

Plan on reseeding some or all of the wildflowers every year.

 Make a special seeding of cosmos in spring (March).Cosmos \_\_\_\_\_ are a hot-weather bloomer that won’t naturalize because they are cold sensitive, but seed spread in summer as if it was a wildflower will bloom and reseed all summer until December.

There are several colors from which to select including pink, white, lavender, gold and yellow. Gold and yellow work best for me.

Depending on the vastness of your planting, its proximity to critical viewers and the amount of rain; it works to make several forays into the wildflower planting during the ugly period with a string mower to selectively remove thistles and other weeds that make the area even uglier to the neatniks.