



Urban Harvest

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## Wildflowers - Easy Garden Color

Jim Sherman

Early April, gardens are alive with color. Shades of red, purple, orange, yellow, and blue never found on a painter's palette highlight and relieve the rich greens and violets of the vegetables that are the garden's *raison d'être*. It took more patience than effort to create these vibrant pockets of color, leaving more time to fuss with broccoli and peppers and tomatoes and sugar-snap peas, and it is likely that the flower patches will continue through the summer and on through the years with very little assistance from the gardener. This organic garden, you see, is lavishly illustrated with the hardy native weeds we call wildflowers.

Wildflower cultivation - on the large scale it is referred to as "native prairie restoration" - is all the rage these days. Ironically, novice gardeners willing to follow directions and lazy gardeners who have better things to do than putter around in the flower bed often have better luck with wildflowers than experienced floral gardeners who equate lush blooms with Herculean effort, and who bemoan that they have worked and worked at growing wildflowers with little result. If they hadn't worked so hard, they might have had better results. There are three simple steps to creating a lush stand of wildflowers, carried out over a period of almost a year, with each step requiring less effort.

The first step, undertaken in the summertime at least three months before a fall planting, is soil preparation. Wildflowers require no tilling of the soil and would, in fact, prefer that you abstain. What is essential is that other, hardier weeds that will compete with, and choke out, the wildflowers be as thoroughly eliminated as is organically possible. (If you are contemplating spraying a section of the yard with Round-Up to create a wildflower space, you are obviously reading the wrong newsletter.) The correct answer, as usual, is "mulch and lots of it." It's not necessary to use any of your precious raised-bed space for wildflowers, which will often do quite well in Houston gumbo. Simply select a sunlit area, mow it short, and mulch it deep.

This should be done at least three (preferably six) months before planting. A half-dozen or so layers of newsprint, covered by at least six inches of wood chips, should suffice. My most successful stand of wildflowers began when I covered a noxious patch of quackgrass with a large piece of unwaxed corrugated cardboard and weighted it with several hay bales. After six months, the quackgrass was gone from that particular spot (elsewhere, the battle continues) and the site was ready for sowing. The most strenuous thing about growing wildflowers successfully is site selection (think sunlight, sunlight, sunlight) and spreading a generous portion of mulch.

The most common problem with growing wildflowers, according to my experience and the advice of experts, comes at sowing time, which in Houston is October and November. Wildflowers are sown,

not planted, and most varieties will refuse to germinate if they are covered by more than an eighth of an inch of soil. Last summer, the owner of the vacant lot next to my garden allowed me to dump a truckload of woodchips on his property, creating by default a suitable wildflower site. After sowing a mixture of native and naturalized flowers, some urge possessed me to heave one single shovel of sifted compost toward the 10-foot by 10-foot bed - most of which covered an area a foot wide, three feet long and a quarter- to half-inch deep.

A few weeks later, when the flowers emerged, that patch was conspicuously barren. To successfully sow wildflowers, remove the mulch, scratch the surface of the soil lightly with a leaf rake, broadcast the seed onto the surface, and water in. Wildflowers take weeks to germinate, and remain at the seedling stage through the winter. After sowing, make a conscious effort to ignore that part of the garden until springtime. Any embellishment or "improvement" on this technique is likely to be a path fraught with disappointment, and irrigation after the initial watering-in is generally unnecessary and probably detrimental.

The third step is to simply relax and enjoy your flowers. If you have situated, prepared and sown your flower bed properly it should be a maintenance-free source of constant delights for both you and the bees and other pollinators your fruits and vegetables depend on. Note the use of "should be" and not "will be", the above mentioned over-the-fence flower patch was evidently directly downwind of a ragweed plant in full bolt, and I have green, vigorous evidence that noxious annual weeds delight in the conditions I've described.

Of course, any garden is only as good as the seeds planted in it. Most seed companies have ventured into the wildflower business, with varying degrees of success. Rather than mention the names of the companies I have been disappointed with, let me suggest a company whose products (and catalog) are consistently excellent: Wildseed Farms in Eagle Lake. Wildseed offers a very extensive selection of native American wildflowers, both in small packets and by the pound. Much as the Antique Rose Emporium hangs the "antique" tag on modern roses that offer the hardiness and growth habits of a true antique rose, Wildseed also offers many "naturalized domestics" that are as hardy and care-free as a true wildflower. If there is a caveat about Wildseed, it is that their mixes - such as the 26-variety "Texas/Oklahoma" mix - combine these impostors with true wildflowers.

Personally, I have no problems with cornflowers and cosmos among the bluebonnets and paintbrushes, but someone determined to recreate an authentic pre-Columbian Texas prairie might choose to buy several packets of "true" wildflowers and combine them. Several area nurseries, including Wabash and Buchanan's, stock a good selection of the more popular Wildseed packets, and this company's full-color catalog is an excellent guide to identifying a multitude of flowers at both the mature and seedling stages and is a comprehensive guide to cultivation. It's a fun book to mull over, winnowing the few things we have room to plant from all the things we'd like to plant, during the months between mulching and sowing.

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