Wildflowers

Plant in Fall, Bloom in Spring: A Texas Guide to Growing Wildflowers



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Most Texas wildflowers bloom in spring, but they are planted in the fall. September to early November is the window for planting most wildflower seed, and the farther north you are in Texas, the earlier in that window you should plant.

Many Texas wildflowers are drought tolerant. They attract butterflies, hummingbirds, songbirds, and other wildlife. Once established they need very little maintenance, and many reseed themselves. An old field, a low meadow, or any sunny spot on a property can be managed for native wildflowers.

Getting there takes patience. Perennials often bloom best in their second or third year, and a planting can take several seasons to fill in.

We have been working to grow wildflowers at our place in Chappell Hill, Washington County, for the past couple of years. We are making progress, but it has been a lesson in how much of this is a multi-year project, with the reward coming down the road.

Here is what you need to know to start doing it successfully.

What This Article Covers

- When to plant wildflower seed in Texas
- How to choose a mix that blooms from early spring into summer
- A photo guide to recommended Texas wildflowers
- Site prep and seeding, step by step
- How to care for your planting so it reseeds year after year

When to Plant

The best time to plant wildflower seed in Texas is September through early November. The farther north you live, the earlier in that window you should plant.

Some seeds sprout in the fall and grow roots before winter, while others need the cold and moisture of winter before they will sprout. Either way, planting in fall puts them in place to bloom in spring.

Pick Your Wildflowers

If your goal is color from early spring into midsummer, not just one big flush in March, you get there by planting a mix of species that bloom at different times. In order to do this:

- **Mix annuals and perennials**. Annuals live for one growing season and can bloom the first year. Perennials come back for multiple years and often bloom better in their second or third year. Together, they carry color across several seasons.

- **Plan a bloom sequence**. An example of a well-planned sequence of blooms is bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes for early spring, then evening primrose, Mexican hat and coreopsis for later in the season, extending the show until early to midsummer. For even more summer color, consider hardy sunflowers.

- **Buy a regional seed mix**. Wildflower blends are formulated for different regions of Texas and are sold online and through local nurseries. A good regional mix also does some of the sorting for you. Species that are not suited to your area will likely die out, leaving behind the plants that are well adapted to your site.

Flowers to Consider

Here are some wildflower species that can do well in Texas:



Bluebonnet
Blooms early spring
Annual



Indian Paintbrush
Blooms early spring
Annual



Coreopsis / Tickseed
Blooms early spring into summer
Perennial and annual types



Mexican hat
Blooms late spring to summer
Perennial



Evening Primrose
Late spring to midsummer
Perennial



Hardy Sunflower
Blooms summer
Perennial and annual types

Photo credits: Bluebonnets: personal photo; Indian paintbrush, Mexican hat, evening primrose, and coreopsis/tickseed: Michael Arnold and Laura McKenzie / Texas A&M AgriLife; sunflower: Texas A&M AgriLife Extension

Site Prep and Seeding

Sun: Wildflowers need full sun. Plan on 6-8 hours of direct sunlight daily.

Soil: Choose a spot with well-drained soil. Four to six weeks before planting, test your soil for pH and fertility. Texas A&M offers soil testing through its lab at soiltesting.tamu.edu.

Location: Wildflower plantings typically look less manicured than a typical bed, so choose a spot where that works. Garden edges work well, as do places where they can be the feature at peak bloom and fade into the background in late summer.

Clear the site: Seeds germinate best without competing plants. Remove existing grass and weeds before you plant. You can do this by digging out existing vegetation, or you can consider using glyphosate if needed.

Loosen the soil: Lightly cultivate the top ½ to 2 inches, using a rake or hand tool. Do not till deeper. Deeper tilling brings buried weed seed to the surface.

Sow the seed: Mix one to two parts clean, dry sand with one part seed. The sand adds volume and helps you spread small seed evenly. Broadcast it by hand or with a drop spreader. For seeding rates, follow the instructions on your seed mix. For bluebonnets specifically, you may need to scarify the seed to improve germination. Scarifying means nicking or scratching the hard seed coat (you can do this with sandpaper) so water can get in. You can also buy seed that has already been scarified.

Press it in: Seeds need firm contact with the soil to germinate, but they should not be buried. Walk over the area or press it with a roller, then add no more than a very light covering of soil or straw.

Water: Water newly planted seed to get it started and keep the soil moist while seedlings germinate. If fall rains do not keep the soil moist, step in with the hose, but do not overwater. Some seeds sprout in 10 to 20 days, while others wait until the following spring.



Care and Reseeding

The first two years: This is when weed control matters most. Pull weeds before they shade out or crowd your seedlings.

Water: Once established, most Texas wildflowers need very little care. Plan on occasional weeding and on watering only during severe drought.

Mowing: Do not mow when plants start to look tired. Mowing too early removes the seed that replenishes your soil's seed bank for next year. Wait until plants have gone to seed, then mow high, leaving at least 8 to 12 inches so you do not injure the plant crowns. Mowing dead plants in winter also leaves a layer of mulch and helps scatter seed.

Watch it change: A wildflower planting shifts over time. Late summer will show a different set of flowers than early spring, and the species best suited to your site will gradually take over.

The Bottom Line

Wildflowers take patience. The seed goes in during the fall, and for most of the winter there is little to see. Plant on time, get good seed-to-soil contact in full sun, and let the plants go to seed before you mow, and one fall planting can keep coming back for years.

Sources

Sources and more information: Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and Texas A&M Forest Service.

- "How to plant wildflowers this fall for spring blooms," Adam Russell, AgriLife Today, Texas A&M AgriLife.
- "Making a Home Wildflower Meadow," Vikram Baliga, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Lubbock County.
- "Texas Superstar: Bluebonnet Seed Harvesting," Yvonne Schneider, Travis County Texas A&M AgriLife Extension.
- "When To Plant Wildflower Seeds For Stunning Spring Blooms," Helen White, Texas A&M AgriLife.
- "Wildflower Establishment," Texas A&M Forest Service.