

## **Grow Some Texas Wildflowers!**

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

If conditions are right, every spring we are blessed with an abundance of beautiful wildflowers on our roadsides and uncultivated lands. It is possible for you to bring some of that natural beauty to your property, but it involves more than just tossing out a few seeds. In order to get that eye popping bumper crop of spring wildflowers there are several things that you need to take into consideration. The most important is where to plant your wildflower meadow.

Wildflowers need at least eight hours of sunlight every day. Some will tolerate a little shade but will tend to get "leggy" and support fewer blossoms without enough sun. The second most important characteristic for the selected site is drainage. Wildflowers need well drained soil. Soil that is compacted and does not drain well will produce mediocre results. Be sure that the site you select already supports vegetation; if it is barren the soil may not have adequate fertility for wildflowers. Finally you need to have a water source nearby in case there is not enough rainfall.

Now that you have selected a site, the second most important question is when do I plant? My answer to that is right now!! (Some sources advocate putting out Bluebonnet seeds as early as late August) Late September and October are the optimal months to plant your wildflowers. Some of the seed will germinate now and will establish a root system over the winter. Other seed will not germinate until next spring and will stay dormant over the winter. When the right combinations of sunlight, ground temperature and water are present, up they pop!

Wildflowers do not need as much site preparation as flowerbeds, but some is required. A couple of weeks before you want to plant; you can use an herbicide to eliminate weeds and other unwanted plants in the area. You can also pull them up manually. Next mow and collect the clippings. Finally rake or till the area lightly; to a maximum of one inch deep. Over preparation of the soil will disturb dormant weed seeds that will germinate and compete with your flowers for nutrition and water. Now you are ready to spread your seeds!

Be sure that you purchase a seed mix that is made up of native Texas wildflower seed, that is adapted for our area. Since many wildflower seeds are very small mix them with vermiculite, potting soil or sand. This makes them easier to spread evenly. Add one part of seed to four parts other material and mix thoroughly before spreading. Broadcast one half of this mixture over the prepared area and then go back the other direction with the other half of the seed. Save a small amount of seed for a pot. Next, walk over the entire area to press the seed into the soil. You can also use a roller to press the seed into the soil. Some of the seed will be visible on the surface. Do not cover the seed. Prepare a large pot and spread a small amount of seed in the container.

The next step is water. For the best results the wildflower area needs to be kept moist for four to six weeks while the seedlings get established. Light and frequent applications (a little once a day depending on conditions) of water that keep the ground moist are especially critical once the seed has begun to germinate. Now you know why fall rain is so critical for a good wildflower season the next spring! Once your wildflowers are about 2 inches in height, you can gradually reduce watering. After that, water only when the plants looked stressed, if you are lucky Mother Nature will take care of it for you.

So now you ask, why the little bit of seed in the flower pot? Well for a couple of reasons. First so you know when the wildflower seedlings begin to sprout and you need to be vigilant about keeping them moist. The seedlings will dry out easily and if they get dry they will die. Second to help you identify wildflower seedlings from weeds! You should periodically weed your wildflower patch as it gets established. Those in the pot will help you determine who is who.

Keep in mind that some wildflower species are perennial and may not bloom the first year they are planted. Your wildflower patch will come back if you continue to take care of it. Grasses tend to invade and can out-compete native flowers or make the blossoms hard to see. There is an herbicide that can be used to control grasses in wildflowers. Ornamec 170 can be applied to reduce grass problems. As with any herbicide follow the instructions carefully to prevent injury to wanted plants. By keeping weeds and grasses controlled, your wildflower patch will reseed it self and the perennials will come back every year.

In order to get the best results wait a minimum of two weeks after the peak flowering period and mow your wildflower patch to a height of 4-6 inches. If you cut it lower you will damage the perennials. There is no need to fertilize wildflowers, if you do they tend to grow lush foliage and produce fewer flowers. If you feel you must fertilize, use a low nitrogen fertilizer that has a 1-3-2 ratio (1part nitrogen, 3parts phosphorus, 2 parts potassium) mixed into the soil at planting.

Finally, don't give up. If your results are not as good as expected, reseed the following fall. Note the flowers that did come up and those that did well. Instead of a general seed mix, plant more of what did well in your selected area. Enjoy the fruits of your labor next spring!