

Wildflower Tips

Wildflowers can be a “throw and grow” proposition—that is, little or no labor involved, outside of removing the dead plants in summer. Many homes and businesses in the Valley show massive displays of African Daisies every spring by using this philosophy, though bloom can be short and thin when drought hits. If you want something more colorful and varied, using a few tricks and “perks” can keep your precious patch of mixed wildflowers from turning

into a cracked wasteland or a lush field of weeds.

First, find an area that gets at least 6 hours of sun through the winter. Only a few wildflowers can withstand more than a half day of shade. A slight slope helps with drainage and a naturalistic appearance. but slopes steeper than about 1 in 12 will cause problems with drought, seed washout in the rain, and even gullies.

Only a few kinds of wildflowers do well in clay soil, so if the soil there is doughy and/or slippery when wet, or forms “mud cracks” when dry, it may be necessary to mix some sand and gypsum into the top 6 inches of soil before planting. That’s also a good time to add a light dose of slow-release, high phosphate fertilizer to meet wildflowers’

minimal nutrient needs. Most kinds of wildflowers need little other soil conditioning.

If you can, water thoroughly the first week of September, before planting, to bring up as many weed seeds as you can. Hoe or spray the young weeds, and they’ll be less of a problem later. Water thoroughly again the day before planting, to help the wildflower seeds to absorb water more quickly. Sow the seeds thinly: usually no more than 2 ounces per 100 square feet. Large seeds, such as Nasturtium, are an exception, because the necessary 50 or so seeds for 100 sq. ft. are

likely to weigh more than 2 oz.! After sowing, turn a leaf rake upside down (with the tines curving up) and lightly and gently rake the seed into the top 1/8 inch of soil. Burying them too deep will make for few sprouts later. An alternate method is to cover the seeds with 1/8 inch of sand. To blend better with a gravel yard, you can put down a light coating of 1/2 inch gravel—no more than 1/2 cubic feet per 12 square feet—before sowing the seed. That gives the seed lots of nooks and crannies to get lost in, and further covering is unnecessary.

After planting the seeds, you can wait for rain (risky!) or you can

water some to get them started quicker. A light watering (no puddles or runoff) twice a day for a week or two will help sprout the seeds if no rain comes. After that, *gradually* reduce the watering frequency to once every 2-4 weeks—again, barring rain. Most years, rainfall will make watering unnecessary, but, in the desert, drought is never very far away!

When bloom is done, the seeds are ripe, and the stems are dry, go out and walk all over those wildflowers! Stomping down the dead plants releases the seeds from their pods, spreads them, and makes it easier to rake up the debris

Most desert native wildflowers should be kept dry over the summer if you expect them to come back

next fall. Some non-native species, such as Johnny-Jump-Up, will accept summer watering and still come up again. A few non-natives won't come back unless you plant new seeds.

Next fall, apply a light dose of slow release fertilizer and be ready to battle weeds in earnest.

Strategically placed stepping stones can make it much easier to pull weed seedlings without trampling wildflower seedlings.