



# Home Garden Seed Association

how nature **grows**

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## *What Makes a Flower a Wildflower?*

- A wildflower will grow on its own, without cultivation.
- It will live within an interactive plant community.
- Generally, wildflowers are used in an informal garden, rather than a high-maintenance formal garden.
- Wildflowers are the sources of all cultivated plant varieties.
- Some are native to a region; others are “naturalized,” that is, they have escaped domestication and now reproduce freely in the natural landscape.

Use wildflowers in a perennial border, or create a pollinator haven by edging your property with them. Many are even suitable for container growing.

### **How to Choose Wildflowers for your garden**

1. Think regionally. Visit a nearby nature preserve in spring, again in summer, and in fall. This will give you no end of ideas.
2. Buy seeds from a company you trust to ensure that you are not introducing an invasive problem into your garden.
3. If you have doubts about whether a plant is safe to introduce into your garden, check the USDA PLANTS Database for information.

**“Where Flowers bloom, so does hope.”**

~Lady Bird Johnson

### **Starting perennial wildflowers from seed is not difficult.**

Before you begin, consider the origin of the plant you are growing. If it originated in a cold winter region, its seeds probably have a built-in dormancy mechanism that will prevent germination until spring.

There’s good reason for this: if the seeds were to sprout during a fall warm-up, the seedlings would undoubtedly be killed by freezing weather. Winter weather softens seed coats through the action of freezing and thawing, allowing them to break dormancy. The term for this is *cold stratification*.

### **Two ways to duplicate nature’s freeze-thaw action:**

- Mix the seed with equal amounts of damp sand or vermiculite and place the mixture in a sealed, labeled plastic bag or airtight container. Store the bag in the refrigerator for about two months. Plant the seeds just after the last spring frost.
- Or, sow the seeds directly in your garden in fall, being sure to mark the spot with the species and date sown. You could also sow seeds in pots, tucking them into a protected spot for the winter.

## Ten Easy-from-Seed Wildflowers



**Columbine** (*Aquilegia canadensis*), native to the woodland and rocky slopes in eastern North America, grows to 3 feet in height and attracts bees, hummingbirds and butterflies in spring. Seeds will germinate easily in spring when they are sown in late fall. Cover minimally with soil.



**Virginia Bluebells** (*Mertensia virginica*), a spring ephemeral native to the moist woodlands of eastern North America, offers beautiful 1 to 2 foot tall lavender blue flowers. Plants disappear completely by summer. Directly sow the seed in late fall, or mix it with damp sand or vermiculite and store in the refrigerator for 60 days before sowing, just after the last spring frost.



**Coneflowers** (*Echinacea* spp.) require a period of cold to germinate. Native to moist to dry prairies, meadows and open woods of eastern and central North America, they reach about 3 feet in height. The native species are purple in color, but cultivars now exist in yellow, orange, white, and other colors.



**Summer Phlox** (*Phlox paniculata*) is a 3 to 4 foot tall garden favorite, with a bloom period that extends from summer into fall. Butterflies flock to these late summer billowy blooms. Seeds require 2 months cold stratification.



**Penstemons** (*Penstemon* spp.) are found throughout the United States in a range of habitats, from deserts to open forests. Rocky Mountain penstemon (*Penstemon strictus*) is easy to grow from seed and is a favorite of hummingbirds. Its 3 foot purple spikes thrive in the southern Rockies. Seeds require 2 months of cold, moist temps.



**California poppy** (*Eschscholzia californica*) is perhaps the easiest wildflower to grow from seed. Native to California and southern Washington, it can be grown just about everywhere. Colorful and compact, it's a favorite of gardeners and pollinators. Subjecting seed to a period of cold, moist treatment may help germination, though sowing right out of the packet generally yields good results.



**Lacy phacelia** (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*) is native to the southwestern states and grows well in hot, dry conditions. A 1 to 3 foot spring blooming annual plant, it is of special benefit to native bees. It germinates easily without any sort of treatment.



**Asclepias species** are famed monarch butterfly plants. Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), a 1 to 2 foot plant, is widespread in dry, open habitats in eastern and southern United States and will grow easily throughout the country. 4-foot tall swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) is adapted to wet areas. Both require 30 or more days of cold, moist temps.



**Black eyed Susans** (*Rudbeckia* spp.) are easy growers. Arguably, the easiest of all is *Rudbeckia triloba*, or three-lobed coneflower. Native to eastern and midwestern states, this 3 to 4 foot bloomer tends to be short-lived but establishes quickly though self-sowing. Sow in fall, or subject seed to a month of cold stratification.



**Coreopsis** (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) grows easily from seed. Colorful, heat and drought tolerant, and attractive to pollinators, it's a good choice for the perennial border or wildflower meadow. For continuous bloom, deadhead frequently, and if plants sprawl, cut them back for a new flush of growth. Sow seed in fall, or in spring after a month of cold stratification.