



Wildflowers

Wildflowers and native grasses are perfect for creating informal, low-maintenance landscape areas. They provide habitat for butterflies, bees, and other desirable insects as well as wild birds, reptiles, and mammals. Over time, seasonal colors will change, textures will vary, and plant species will even subtly shift their locations as the plants naturalize. Given the informal appearance of a meadow, one would think that creating one would be easy, but this is false. Natural looking meadows can be difficult to establish in areas that have been neglected and/or disturbed.

It is best to start small so that you can nurture the meadow and keep weeds out. This also allows for natural expansion of the area. Wildflowers prefer a sunny location with good drainage. First, you should reduce the weed population in your meadow area. Perennial weeds should be managed to prevent them from choking out desirable plants. Herbicides can be used without deleterious impacts to natives if selected and applied correctly. Annual weeds should be pulled before they go to seed. By watering and observing, you will also learn to recognize juvenile weeds.

Soils should be amended with a small amount of compost or other weed-free organic matter to improve water holding capacity and aeration. Lightly scratch the compost into the soil to a shallow depth (2 to 4 inches) using a garden cultivator. Rake the bed smooth and irrigate thoroughly. After the amended soil has settled and become friable, it is ready for seeding. Do not apply nitrogen fertilizer as it can be detrimental to wildflowers.

Wildflowers, like grasses, are either adapted to grow in the warm season or cool season. Cool season plants germinate in winter or early spring and die out when it gets hot. Warm season plants rely on warm soil temperatures to germinate and thrive in hot weather. Beware of inexpensive wildflower seed mixes. They may not be well adapted to our local climate and elevation and may even contain prohibited or invasive species. Native grasses are also a pleasant addition to a wildflower meadow and these can also be seeded, divided, or transplanted.

High quality wildflower seed is often expensive and should be broadcast sparingly. Read the label to ensure the seed you purchase is free of weeds and suitable for your area. Beware of mixes that contain cosmos, bachelor buttons, and sweet alyssum. These are not really wildflowers and are often used as filler in low quality seed mixes.

Broadcast the seed and rake it lightly to ensure soil contact. Do not bury the seed deeply. It only requires good seed/soil contact. During the first two months, moisture is very critical. Timing the seeding with a moist season is the best way to get seeds in synch with their environment. Supplemental irrigation can be used if precipitation is lacking. After two months, the seedlings should be up. You may also need to protect the area from rabbits with a temporary low fence – especially during periods of drought.

Some suitable cool season wildflowers are: Penstemon (many species), California or Mexican Poppy (*Eschscholtzia* sp.), Blue Flax (*Linum lewisii*), Desert Marigold (*Baileya multiradiata*), Blue Dick (*Dichelostemma puchellum*), Lupine (*Lupinus* sp.), Clarkia (*Clarkia* sp.), Columbine (*Aquilegia* sp.), and Phlox (*Phlox* sp.). A great cool season native grass is needle and thread (*Hesperostipa comata*). Most of these can be planted in early spring and require cool, moist exposure to the soil to germinate. This is called stratification.

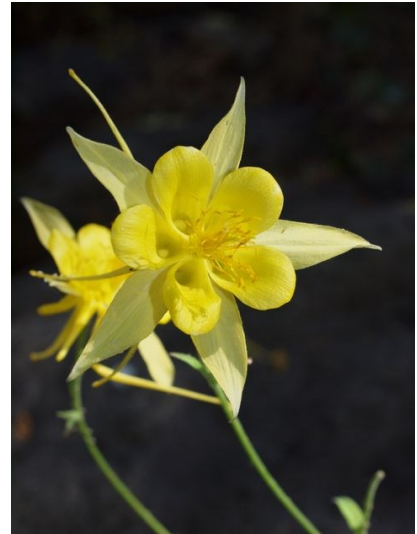
Some suitable warm season wildflowers are: Evening Primrose (*Oenothera* sp.), Blanketflower (*Gaillardia* sp.), Paperflower (*Psilostrophe bakerii*), Blackfoot Daisy (*Melampodium leucanthum*), Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), Rocky Mountain Bee Plant (*Cleome serrulata*), Verbena (*Verbena* sp.), and Globemallow (*Sphaeralcea* sp.). Two attractive grasses are Indian Ricegrass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*) and Blue Grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*). These are best seeded in May or June before monsoon rains.



Blanketflower or firewheel (*Gaillardia pulchella*), common wildflower in many landscapes and roadside plantings in Yavapai County.



Globemallow (*Sphaeralcea* sp.), common wildflower in Yavapai County.



Golden columbine (*Aquilegia chrysantha*) grows in shady glades near riparian areas in northern Arizona.

Photos by Sue Smith, University of Arizona Master Gardener. <https://cals.arizona.edu/yavapaiplants/>

Be patient as wildflowers can be slow to establish and plan on weeding your meadow for at least the first year or two. Pull or treat the weeds before they go to seed and remember to give the meadow some water during our typical May/June warm dry period if precipitation is scarce. All of the species mentioned are included in the on-line Yavapai County Native and Naturalized Plant Database (<http://cals.arizona.edu/yavapaiplants/>).

Additional Resource

Seed Ball Strategies for Gardening and Restoration in Arid Landscapes,
University of Arizona Cooperative Extension
<https://extension.arizona.edu/sites/extension.arizona.edu/files/pubs/az1797-2019.pdf>

March 5, 2023

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