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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Wildflowers, a casual and colorful alternative to conventional ornamentals, have brought both excitement and frustration to enthusiastic superintendents and groundskeepers in recent years. Here are "Seven Sure Steps to Success," developed by The Wildflower Group of the American Seed Association, that can help make wildflowers flourish.

Determine Your Objectives. Purposes and goals vary widely, but a showy display of color is often the primary objective in growing wildflowers. Another goal may be to plant only wildflowers that are native to a specific geographical area. Other important considerations may be height, color range, bloom time, and cost. The role of the seed supplier is to meet the customer's needs, so be sure to define and discuss your objectives. Wildflower mixes to suit a wide range of requirements are available from a number of sources.

Site Selection. Wildflowers perform best in moderately fertile soils with good moisture-holding capacities. Adequate rainfall or irrigation will insure germination and long-term growth. It is unrealistic to expect wildflowers to grow in areas that have never supported vegetation. Steep slopes present a special challenge. They should be planted after consultation with experts, and usually require the use of a mulching material to hold the seeds in place.

Rainfall and Irrigation. Climate and precipitation are primary considerations. In climates with at least 30 inches of rainfall per year, supplemental watering is usually unnecessary except during periods of drought. If rainfall is less than 30 inches, plan to supply 1/2 inch of water per week.

Selecting the Seed. Reputable suppliers can provide advice about which mix or individual species to plant, as well as soil preparation and maintenance. In warm climates like those along the West Coast and in the Gulf Coast states, mixes may contain a high proportion of annuals because they will readily reseed. In cold climates, however, mixes should contain about 40 percent perennials. It is important to include annuals because they act as a nurse crop for the slower growing perennials, which do not bloom until the second or third year.

The annuals grow quickly, help to prevent erosion, and discourage weeds while the perennials are becoming established. Most annuals will not reseed in cold climates.

How To Plant. The best times to plant wildflowers are determined by rainfall and climate. Planting in the fall is advantageous because it facilitates early germination and growth. In cold climates, fall plantings should be late enough so seeds do not germinate until spring. In mild climates, fall plantings prior to periods of moisture will insure an early display of annuals. Planting in early spring is also recommended in most climates. However, if seeds are planted in late spring or early summer, supplemental waterings may be necessary to insure wildflower establishment.

Weed Control. The importance of preventive weed control cannot be over-emphasized. When preparing your site, first remove the existing vegetation. Create a loose seed bed by tilling. If tilling is not feasible, at least scarify the top surface of the soil. Most importantly, eliminate the weed seeds that are on or near the surface. To accomplish this, irrigate, and then eliminate seedlings by chemical or mechanical means. If weeds are very numerous, it may be necessary to irrigate and spray twice before sowing the wildflowers. Do not till a second time or more weed seeds may come to the surface.

Maintenance. A successful maintenance program may include weeding regularly, irrigating during dry periods, and mowing once in the fall to achieve a neat appearance. Weeding may be by hand or by appropriate spot-spraying with an herbicide. To eliminate undesirable grasses, a post-emergent herbicide may be applied anytime during the growing season. After mowing, leave the cut plant material in place for reseeding and to provide a protective mulch for the perennials. Good maintenance is important to create an ongoing display of wildflowers that will provide beauty for many years. Overseeding of bare areas in the fall or spring will insure broad diversity and a beautiful display.

For more information, or a list of seed suppliers, contact: The Wildflower Group, A.S.T.A., 1030 15th St., N.W. Washington, DC 20005-1593.