

**W**ildflowers can be a colorful, relatively low-maintenance addition to a park, recreational facility, or golf course. However, they should succeed, both in the short and long-term. Here are a few suggestions, courtesy of the National Wildflower Research Center in Austin, TX, that can keep the wildflowers growing into the future.

### Tempering Great Expectations

"People need to realize it takes three to five years to get good wildflower establishment," explains Elinor Crank, a research scientist with the National Wildflower Research Center. "You have to know what to expect. There are periods when a wildflower installation isn't going to be colorful."

One way to help wildflower installations retain their color, Crank suggests, is to include species that bloom at different times. Later blooming wildflowers will hide earlier blooming wildflowers that have gone to seed.

Maintenance is equally crucial. "You can't just buy seed, plant it, and then forget it," Crank asserts. "Wildflowers need monitoring and maintenance. A lot depends on the maintenance program.



Wildflower installation along a tee and fairway at the Vintage Club in Palm Desert, CA..

# STEPS TO WILDFLOWER SUCCESS

Wildflowers can help soften otherwise harsh landscapes.  
Photos courtesy S & S Seeds.

If, for example, you don't feel the need to have the wildflower installation mowed the minute it turns brown, that will influence the seed mix."

### Go Native

"There were a lot of problems in the beginning with wildflower use because people planted non-native species for the 'big color show,' and those often die

out," Crank observes. "That's one of the reasons we emphasize using native species."

How native is native? In the prairie states, for example, Crank says that "native" can mean that the species is grown within a 100-mile radius of the area in question. She adds that although such a specific guideline is important for prairie grasses, it is not yet known how significant it is for wildflowers.

Before settling on a wildflower species, a visit to a natural, undisturbed area near the proposed installation site is a good idea. This will help you determine the wildflowers that will perform best on your site. Inventory the site and its microhabitats, such as wet, low-lying areas, shady areas, or open fields, then determine the species best suited to these site conditions.

When selecting a wildflower species, consider:

**Height.** What is the plant's maximum height of maturity?

**Bloom Period.** When does the species flower?

**Life History.** A mix of perennials and self-seeding annuals and biennials is optimum in many cases. Annuals generally germinate and flower in the first year. Perennials often take two to three

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## Wildflowers

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years to mature before flowering, expending most of their initial energy on development of a healthy root system.

**Availability.** Is seed commercially available?

**Noxious Weed Potential.** Is the species highly aggressive or competitive? Does it have the potential to become invasive?

"One of the potential problems with wildflowers in residential settings is that often there are weed ordinances that prevent people from having natural lawns," Crank notes. "The weed ordinance issue began as a weed control method, but currently as applied to wildflower plantings it is often used for aesthetic reasons. Often the ordinances have height restrictions where the vegetation cannot be above 18 inches, for example."

### Pursue Quality

According to the National Wildflower Research Center, the two crucial indicators of wildflower seed quality are **germination percentage** and **purity**. A third indicator, **Pure Live Seed (PLS)** combines these percentages.

*Germination percentage* refers to the

proportion of seed that will germinate under optimum laboratory conditions. Although these conditions are by design far less demanding than those in the field, in all cases, the higher the percentage, the better the seed quality.

Storage and harvest periods can affect germination percentage. Improper storage can reduce germination percentage. If a particular type of seed was harvested a year ago, for example, it would be important to know how it was stored.

*Purity* is a measure of the proportion of wildflower seed a given sample contains. Wildflower seed has many shapes and sizes, which often makes it hard to clean. The portion of a sample not from the stated species may include seed for other varieties, noxious weed seed, or inert matter such as chaff and broken seeds.

*PLS* combines germination percentage and purity. It is reached by multiplying together the numbers for germination percentage and purity percentage, then dividing the total by 100. The quotient indicates the percentage of pure live seed. Generally speaking, the higher the PLS, the better the quality of seed.

### Set Your Goals

"There are really two directions you

can take with wildflowers—ornamental and restoration" says Crank. "In terms of planting technique, they may be similar, but their goals are different. These days, we're seeing a lot more restoration work, where people want to put back the natural environment, particularly on large sites."

In addition to the selection recommendations mentioned previously, Crank suggests the following procedures on restoration projects. Many of these can also be applied to ornamental projects.

**Salvage.** Native plants on the site can be salvaged and put back into the site.

**Contract Grow.** Local nurseries will often "contract" grow specific native plant materials if contracted well in advance of specification and installation.

**Collect Native Seed.** Not all species may be available from your local supplier. Having someone collect native grass and wildflower seed is cheap insurance against unavailability.

**Stockpile Native Soil.** Soil from another area may not be ideal for the wildflowers that were carefully researched and selected for the specific site. The stockpiling of native soil present on the site is most beneficial as a source of native seed that is present in the soil.

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## Prepare The Site

If the site is extremely weedy, with no desirable native plants, you would need to scrape the soil clean or use herbicides before planting. As a rule, however, you want to disturb the soil as little as possible to avoid bringing up any buried weed seeds. Wildflowers can also be "interseeded" in existing vegetation, if the site is not weed-infested. Such areas include (warm-season) grasslands, which must first be mowed. The soil should then be "roughed up," or a layer of topsoil should be applied, before seeding.

*Use Commercially Available Wildflower Seed.* Look for availability of native species, quality, and price.

Carefully researched and specified, wildflowers can add low-maintenance, water use brilliance to your recreational facility or golf course. Remembering these few simple guidelines today can help keep everyone satisfied tomorrow. □

*Editor's Note: Much of the information in this article was adapted from the National Wildflower Research Center's "Guidelines For Landscape Architects." To receive the publication or additional information, contact the organization at 2600 FM 937 North, Austin, TX 78725-4201, (512) 929-3600.*

## NATIONAL WILDFLOWER SEED SUPPLIERS

There are a number of wildflower seed companies around the country. If you're searching for seeds that are suitable for your area, you may want to consider a local supplier. However, some national distributors may also be able to meet your specific needs. Here's a look a brief look at the three firms that distribute wildflower seed nationwide.

Known primarily for its turfgrass seed, **Lofts, Inc.**, headquartered in Bound Brook, NJ, markets its increasingly popular Pinto brand of customized wildflower mixtures. Lofts grows seed in the United States, Europe, and Australia and has complete research, blending, and warehousing facilities on U.S. East Coast and West Coast—the New Jersey facility and Lofts Great Western Division in Oregon. The company distributes through branches in Massachusetts, Ohio, Maryland, and Georgia, as well as a nationwide network of regional distributors.

Based in Lompoc, CA, on the state's fertile central coast, **Environmental Seed Producers, Inc.**, has been growing and selling wildflower seed since 1974. The company sells its seed wholesale to other seed companies, but also sells to state

transportation departments, city parks, golf courses, hydroseeders, and landscapers. The firm carries more than 120 wildflower species and has formulated its own mixes suitable for regional climates around the United States. They also design custom blends.

**S & S Seeds** in Carpinteria, CA, is a wholesale supplier of wildflower, tree, shrub, grass, and native plant seed. Its wildflower seed is collected from native stands, grown on its own farms, and seed grown by contract producers. The company has a seed cleaning and processing facility for seed conditioning. All seed lots are tested for purity, germination, and noxious weeds in certified seed laboratories. The company supplies wildflower seed to state agencies, seed dealers, and green industry professionals around the United States.

**Turf Seed, Inc.**, in Hubbard, OR, markets an extensive assortment of seed mixes containing wildflowers, native grasses, and low-maintenance grasses. Custom mixes are available. Wildflower breeding, testing, and selection are under the direction of Crystal Rose Fricker.

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