

Wildflowers for the Home Landscape: Perennials for Sunny Sites

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With proper selection, planting, and care, wildflowers can be a beautiful and distinctive component of the home landscape. This NebGuide provides guidelines you can follow.

Wildflowers and native plants can be unique and interesting additions to the home landscape. The terms “wildflower” and “native plant” are often used synonymously, but there are differences. Wildflowers are described as flowering herbaceous plants (forbs) that grow with little or no human assistance. They can be native or introduced. Native plants in the Great Plains are generally described as those found growing in a defined area prior to the arrival of European settlers. Native plants may be grasses, forbs, sedges, shrubs, or trees. Wildflowers and native plants also may be classified as annuals, biennials, or perennials. Perennials are plants that live for more than two years.

Wildflowers can be used as landscape plants, as fresh cut flowers, in dried floral arrangements, to attract butterflies and other pollinators, and for planting in conjunction with grasses in meadows or prairies. They also may be used in low maintenance areas and in sites requiring drought-tolerant plants. However, some native species may be less drought-tolerant than non-native species. Some native plants and wildflowers are highly adapted for wetland use as well.

Site Selection and Design

Wildflower plantings in home landscapes may range from using a single plant in a flower garden to establishing extensive plantings in large areas. They can be planted alone or combined with other plants. Wildflowers can be used in minimeadows, prairie plantings, small residential plots, or in larger landscape plantings. Prairie plantings are an alternative to traditional lawns, and not only provide beauty but can be used to attract butterflies and wildlife and add a sense of motion and openness to landscapes.

Design the planting by matching your site conditions with adapted wildflowers that will create the appearance you want. For complex designs and plantings on large commercial sites, consider consulting a landscape designer or someone familiar with prairie restoration. Check local regulations, which may limit the type of wildflower plantings you can use at the location.

Plants selected for use in a wildflower planting should be based on the intended use of the planting and the site conditions. For example, some plants are better at attracting butterflies, and some are more adapted to sandy soils than clay soils. When selecting wildflowers, consider the size of a mature plant, foliage texture, time of flowering, flower and foliage color, and if used in prairie plantings, their competitiveness with grasses. Also consider the disadvantages or inherited weaknesses of some plants, such as a short life span, short flowering time, aggressive or invasive growth, problems with volunteer seedlings, or plant size that exceeds local regulations.

Start with a small wildflower planting and expand it as time permits. A site where other plants will not grow, or one with some type of soil problem, probably will not be ideal for wildflowers. Sun-loving wildflowers require sunny sites with a minimum of six to eight hours of direct sun per day. It will be more challenging to establish wildflowers on steep slopes, in poorly drained areas, or in areas that are heavily shaded.

Site Preparation and Planting

Prepare a site for wildflowers by working the soil to a depth of about 10 to 12 inches, if possible, using a spade, rototiller, or plow. If soil erosion is a concern, working the soil should be kept to a minimum. If the site is heavily compacted or low in organic matter, improve the soil by applying 2 to 3 inches of well-rotted manure or finished compost on the soil surface and incorporating it.

Eliminate weeds, especially perennial weeds, before planting. Perennial weeds can best be eliminated by using

cultivation or nonselective herbicides. Use nonselective herbicides that will not inhibit the growth of transplants or seedlings for the new wildflower plantings. To help reduce annual weeds in a wildflower planting, till the site, water to encourage weed seed germination, then cultivate again to destroy young weed seedlings.

Establishing wildflower plants from transplants is becoming more common, and for small plantings is often easier than direct seeding. Even for large plantings, transplants offer the advantage of determining exact plant placement, quicker establishment, and easier weed control. Phase the plantings of large areas by setting transplants of perennial wildflowers out in smaller patches over a period of several years.

For very large areas where wildflowers are planted alone or in combination with grasses, plantings are usually direct-seeded. Seeding rates will vary with the type of plants and the size of seed, but 3 to 5 ounces of seed per 1,000 square feet is an average seeding rate. Check the label of packaged wildflower seed for specific planting instructions.

Seed should be evenly distributed on the site. Lightly rake the seed in and then gently pack it into the soil to establish good seed/soil contact. A light mulch of clean, weed-free straw may be necessary to reduce erosion. Late fall or early spring is the most desirable time to seed wildflowers. Do not expect an instant prairie from seeded plantings. It may take several years to establish a planting that gives the desired appearance. Wildflower seed does not always germinate reliably and uniformly, and weeds can be a problem in newly seeded areas. Perennial plants spend much of the first year developing strong roots with minimum top growth. Most perennials usually will not flower until the second year after they are planted. Overseeding may be necessary to maintain a diverse wildflower planting.

Maintenance

Aggressive competition from weeds is often the major problem in wildflower plantings. Periodically, weeds may need to be eliminated. Herbicides may be used in some plantings, but no one herbicide will control all weeds without harming some desired plants. Hand pulling weeds is effective in smaller plantings. Mowing is an effective weed control method during the first year on direct seeded, larger sites, to keep weeds from going to seed. Mow to a height of about 6 inches. If the wildflower planting includes annuals, mowing will reduce or eliminate flowering and reseeding of the annuals, especially during the first growing season. Some wildflowers produce large quantities of seed and can dominate a planting if the seed is not removed.

Supplemental water may be necessary, especially during establishment. Providing the right amount of moisture is important. Do not over-water plants adapted to dry sites or allow wetland species to dry out during periods of extended drought.

Some professionals recommend an annual burning of a prairie. However, this is not recommended for home landscapes. A good mowing in early spring, followed by raking and removing the loose material, should take its place.

Plant Material

Plant material can be obtained from local nurseries, mail order companies, wildflower societies, and other organizations. It also can be collected from wild or cultivated plants, but caution should be used when collecting plants or seed from native sites. Some wildflowers are endangered or rare, and it is illegal to collect them. It is also illegal to collect plants from certain sites. Collecting too much plant material from a native site also can have a negative impact on the site. Wildflowers growing in natural areas often do not survive transplanting, and natural populations can be disturbed, damaged, or eliminated by collecting plants or seeds. Seed from many wildflower species requires special conditions to induce germination.

Wildflowers can be purchased and planted as seed or individual plants. Individual species or a mix of several species can be planted. Prepackaged wildflower seed mixes are commonly available. Study the label to learn the contents; how large an area it will plant; and the type of site to which it is adapted, such as sunny or shaded, wet or dry. Not all mixes perform equally well in all areas and a mix may contain species that will dominate the planting. Many commercial wildflower mixes contain common annual garden flower seed such as sweet alyssum, cosmos, bachelor's button, and California poppy, rather than Nebraska native flowers. These mixes produce attractive plantings, but they are not considered native. Some will reseed profusely, and others may last for only a season or two.

Transplants of many perennial wildflowers are now available through reliable nurseries. The seed of wildflowers can be used to grow your own plants for transplants as well. Wildflowers also can be propagated using cuttings, division, layering, and tissue culture. These propagation methods are discussed in other references.

Table 1 lists common perennial wildflowers that can be grown in most sunny garden sites in Nebraska. Others are available as well. This list includes plants that may not be classified as wildflowers by all vendors and gardeners.

Table I. Common perennial wildflowers for use in the home landscape.

<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>	<i>Bloom Color</i>	<i>Height (ft)</i>	<i>Bloom Time</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<i>Achillea</i> species	Yarrow	white/yellow/mixed	2 - 3	June-Aug.	vigorous
<i>Amorpha canescens</i>	Leadplant	violet/blue	1 - 4	June-July	shrubby
<i>Antennaria</i> species	Pussytoes	white/pink	.5 - 1.0	May-July	groundcover
<i>Asclepias incarnata</i>	Swamp Milkweed	pinkish-rose	4 - 5	July-Aug.	wet soils
<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Butterfly Milkweed	orange/orange-red/yellow	2 - 3	June-Aug.	butterflies
<i>Aster</i> species	Asters	pink/rose/deep blue/white	3 - 5	July-Oct.	butterflies
<i>Baptisia</i> species	Wild Indigo	white/yellow/blue	2 - 5	May-June	winter pods
<i>Callirhoe involucrata</i>	Purple Poppy Mallow	crimson/purple	.5 - 1.0	June-July	groundcover
<i>Calylophus serrulatus</i>	Plains Yellow Primrose	yellow	.5 - 2.0	May-Aug.	woody base
<i>Ceanothus americanus</i>	New Jersey Tea	white	1 - 4	May-July	shrubby
<i>Coreopsis</i> species	Coreopsis, Tickseed	yellow/orange/red	1 - 3	June-Sept.	cut flower
<i>Dalea candida</i>	White Prairie Clover	white	1 - 2	June-July	butterflies
<i>Dalea purpureum</i>	Purple Prairie Clover	rose-purple	1 - 3	June-July	cut flower
<i>Dalea villosa</i>	Silky Prairie Clover	pink	1.0 - 1.5	July-Aug.	sandy sites
<i>Echinacea angustifolia</i>	Pale Coneflower	pale pink	2 - 4	July-Aug.	cut flower
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Purple Coneflower	pink/purple	2 - 3	June-July	butterflies
<i>Eupatorium purpureum</i>	Joe-pye Weed	red-violet	3 - 6	July-Sept.	moist sites
<i>Eustoma grandiflorum</i>	Prairie Gentian	white/lavender	1.0 - 1.5	June-Aug.	biennial/annual
<i>Gaillardia</i> species	Blanket Flower	yellow/orange	1 - 3	June-Aug.	dry sites
<i>Helenium autumnale</i>	Helen's Flower	yellow/maroon	2 - 5	Aug.-Sept.	wet sites
<i>Helianthus</i> species	Sunflower	yellow	4 - 10	Sept.-Oct.	bird food
<i>Hesperis matronalis</i>	Dame's Rocket	purple	2 - 3	May-June	naturalized
<i>Liatris punctata</i>	Dotted Gayfeather	pink/lavender	1 - 2	Aug.-Sept.	cut flower
<i>Liatris pycnostachya</i>	Tall Gayfeather	pink/lavender	2 - 5	June-Aug.	butterflies
<i>Linum perenne</i>	Blue Flax	blue	1 - 2	May-July	reseeds
<i>Lithospermum incisum</i>	Narrow-leafed Puccoon	yellow	.5 - 1.0	April-June	edger
<i>Monarda</i> species	Bee Balm	pink-lavender	2 - 5	June-Aug.	moist soils
<i>Oenothera</i> species	Evening Primrose, Sundrops	yellow	1 - 2	June-Sept.	edger
<i>Penstemon angustifolius</i>	Narrow-leaf Penstemon	violet-blue	1.0 - 1.5	May-June	well-drained soils
<i>Penstemon grandiflorus</i>	Shell-leaf Penstemon	white/lavender	2 - 3	May-June	well-drained soils
<i>Penstemon</i> species	Penstemon	mixed	.5 - 4.0	May-July	many species
<i>Phlox andicola</i>	Plains Phlox	white	.5	May-June	Western NE
<i>Phlox pilosa</i>	Prairie Phlox	pink	1 - 2	May-July	scented
<i>Pulsatilla patens</i>	Pasque Flower	white/purple	.5 - 1.5	May-June	reseeds
<i>Ratibida columnifera</i>	Prairie Coneflower	yellow/red	1 - 2	June-Aug.	short-lived
<i>Ratibida pinnata</i>	Grayhead Coneflower	yellow	2 - 5	July-Aug.	reseeds
<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>	Black-eyed Susan	yellow/orange	1 - 3	June-July	cut flower
<i>Ruellia humilis</i>	Prairie Petunia	blue/violet	1 - 2	June-Aug.	vigorous
<i>Salvia azurea</i>	Blue Sage or Pitcher Sage	blue-violet	3 - 6	Aug.-Sept.	backdrop
<i>Solidago rigida</i>	Stiff Goldenrod	yellow/gold	2 - 4	Aug.-Sept.	reseeds
<i>Tradescantia bracteata</i>	Bracted Spiderwort	blue/purple/pink	1 - 1.5	May-June	moist sites
<i>Yucca glauca</i>	Small Soapweed	greenish-white	3 - 5	May-July	evergreen

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