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Over 600 species of wildflowers are native to Arkansas and grace our roadways and scenic drives in the state. Many are also being planted in home gardens along with other flowers to attract butterflies and bees, or just to enjoy. Some wildflowers are spring ephemerals—here today and gone tomorrow, while others bloom in the summer, some in the fall and a few bloom in winter. There are shade lovers and sun lovers, so there are wildflowers that can fit any landscape. Wildflowers can be planted from seed or transplants, but October is the ideal month to get a wildflower garden established, especially if you are planting seeds.

When choosing wildflowers, try to pick plants that need the same growing conditions as your site—sun versus shade, good soil versus poor, wet versus dry. As with any garden, it all comes down to the right plant for the right spot. Decide what type of garden you want. Do you want to intersperse some wildflowers in with your existing landscape, or create a meadow or a woodland garden? Make sure that you choose a variety of plants, with some that bloom in every season so you can extend the show. Having a mix of annuals and perennials ensures flowering year one. Seed grown perennials may take two seasons before they have good blooms. Adding a few wildflower plants along with the seeds also can aid in establishment and give you earlier blooms in the garden. You will want a combination of both annual and perennial varieties along with spring, summer and fall bloomers.

Most wildflowers prefer a well-drained soil. Prepare the site well. You can't just throw out a packet of seed on an unprepared area and sit back and wait for a showy wildflower meadow. You need to kill the grass and weeds that are in the area so that you reduce the competition factor. If you over-seed a field of grass and weeds with wildflower seed, you will have a field of grass and weeds with a few wildflowers. Weeds and grass are always going to be a pest in full sun beds, but with proper planning, you can reduce the problems. The larger the planting, the more planning is required. Established wildflower gardens will not need as much maintenance as a traditional garden, but they aren't maintenance-free.

Once the area has been cleared of weeds and grass, till the soil and lightly rake it. If you have rocky soil, you may want to amend with compost before tilling and planting. Depending on the size of the area you are planting, you can hand sow the seeds or use a broadcast spreader to sow the seeds. A general rule is about 1 pound of wildflower seed will cover 2000 square feet, but it will vary by the mix you buy. Mixing seeds with sand can also help with distribution. Three to four parts sand mixed with 1 part seed helps distribute the seeds evenly. Once you sow the seeds, make sure they come in firm contact with the soil by lightly raking or rolling the area. A roller is an empty drum that you fill with water and roll over the planting area, helping create the soil-seed contact. Once you sow seeds and/or plant plants, water well if possible.

Wildflower seeds require ample moisture to germinate. For best results, the area should be kept moist for four to six weeks during the establishment period. Home gardeners have an advantage here over commercial plantings. Light, frequent

applications of water will work well, keeping the area moist, but not waterlogged. After your seedlings are 1-2 inches tall, gradually reduce watering. Once established water only when the plants show signs of stress. If you are planting a large area, and watering is not possible, always opt for fall planting, so natural rainfall can help the seedlings germinate.

Where do you get wildflowers? First and foremost, don't dig them from the wild unless you own the property or have permission from the landowner. If everyone dug up the plants they came across there wouldn't be any left for the rest of us to enjoy. When buying wildflower seed it is helpful to buy from a source as close to where you live as possible. Seeds raised in similar climatic conditions should survive well in your yard.

There are many wildflowers to choose from and many wildflower companies create mixes for various purposes. Some of the most popular perennials include Echinacea (coneflowers), Rudbeckia (Black-eyed Susan), Asclepias (milkweeds), coreopsis, and gaillardia. For some good annuals to throw in the mix consider larkspur, bachelor buttons and Shirley poppies.

Wildflower gardens are becoming an increasingly popular landscape alternative. Be patient when planting a wildflower garden. You won't have a picture-perfect garden in one year. It usually takes about three years for the garden to mature and come into its own. But with proper plant selection, you can have blooming flowers even in year one. With proper planning, a small packet of seeds can turn into a beautiful, natural garden. But do remember, one person's wildflowers, may be another person's weeds.

Whether you have a large meadow you want to convert to wildflowers, or you want to grow a few in a container, wildflowers can give you years of enjoyment.

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