

Fall is a great time to plant a wildflower meadow

BY DAVID COPPS • SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT • OCTOBER 8, 2009

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Historically, Florida's landscape was alive with color from spring through fall. Fire-maintained pinelands, fallow agricultural fields, and marshy areas around lakes and rivers produced an abundance of native grasses and flowering forbs. Even though we've lost much of that legacy through the rapid urbanization of the state, we can reclaim some of Florida's colorful past in our own yards and neighborhoods.

ADVERTISEMENT To successfully cultivate a long-blooming wildflower meadow in the home landscape, it's helpful to select plants from the two major blooming periods — spring and fall. In the spring and early summer, annuals and perennials such as gaillardia, lance-leaf coreopsis, dye flower, black-eyed Susan and Drummond phlox are the main attraction. The next major season of bloom is the fall when tall perennials including narrow-leaf sunflower, goldenrods, asters and blazing star put on a show. These tough plants intermingle with native bunch grasses such as Indian grass, bluestems, purple-top and muhly grass. The grasses support the tall, lanky wildflowers and provide interesting textures and beautiful russet, tan and golden hues.

Successful planting begins with good site preparation. Choose a sunny area and cut the existing vegetation down to the ground. Lay down tarps, sheets of cardboard or old carpet to smother what's left. This is best done in the summer in advance of fall planting. Vegetation control also can be accomplished by applying a glyphosate-based herbicide (follow label instructions).

As a general rule, many of the spring-blooming wildflowers can be purchased in seed form while fall-blooming perennials and grasses usually are available as container-grown seedlings. While not always possible, it's best to purchase seeds and plants known to be Florida ecotypes. These are strains that are native to Florida and best adapted to our environment. Consult with local nurseries and garden centers for more information on plant and seed availability and seeding rates. Other good sources of information are the Wildflower Seed And Plant Growers Association Inc. (www.floridawildflowers.com); Association of Florida Native Nurseries (www.afnn.org); and the Florida Wildflower Foundation (www.floridawildflowerfoundation.org)

In the fall, prepare a seedbed by raking off the dead vegetation and "lightly" roughing the area up. Don't turn or till the soil as this may expose buried weed seeds. Broadcast the wildflower seeds at the recommended rate then press them into the soil with a sod roller, tamper or just by stomping the area. Good seed to soil contact is essential! Containerized plants should be planted after the seeding process.

Wildflower seeds require ample moisture during the germination period. If rainfall is inadequate, supplemental watering might be required for the first few weeks. Once established though, the meadow needs very little, if any, irrigation. Fertilizers should be avoided altogether as they promote the growth of aggressive weeds.

For long-term maintenance, cut the meadow back annually in late winter. Cut no lower than 6 to 8 inches to avoid damaging the crowns of grasses and wildflowers. A string trimmer is a great tool for accomplishing this task.

The benefits of growing wildflowers where we live are many — enhanced outdoor experiences for our children; more songbirds and butterflies; and the restoration of a special sense of natural history close to home.

- David Copps is a natural landscape designer/gardener and member of the advisory committee of University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County, <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/>.



Seed wildflowers such as gaillardia, lance-leaf coreopsis, dye flower, black-eyed Susan and Drummond phlox. (Special to the Democrat)

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