

Wildflowers to Love

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

Who doesn't love wildflowers? Viewing or even imagining a natural area with an abundance of wildflowers in various shapes, colors and forms is a pleasing activity for most people. But do we ever stop to think about what a wildflower actually is? In the simplest sense, a wildflower is just that—a flower that is wild, or according to the dictionary: “living or growing in the natural environment; not domesticated or cultivated.” Thus we might limit the meaning to only flowers that are growing in natural areas. But that would take a lot of the fun out of it for those of us that want to make room for a little bit of wildness right in our own yards.

There are several benefits of using wildflowers in the home landscape, including the obvious benefit of colorful blooms coming and going across seasons. Part of the fun is the suspense and surprise of not knowing exactly which species will show up when and where, and how things can change from year to year. Other great benefits of wildflowers include an abundance of insects and other wildlife attracted to the garden; a reduced need for supplemental watering; and the chance to pick a richly diverse bouquet of flowers to brighten our indoor lives.

Wildflowers can be used in various ways from island plantings, to borders, to mixing with other landscape elements like tree and shrub islands or perennial borders. Once established, it's as easy as gathering the dried seedheads and sprinkling them around wherever a bit of next-year-surprise is desired.

Although every flower in the garden has wild origins, we generally don't think of longer-lived perennials as wildflowers. For purposes of this discussion, wildflowers are considered to be those that are easily grown from seed, have a tendency to reseed themselves, and are fairly short-lived (thus the need to reseed themselves from year to year). A wildflower doesn't have to be native to be wild, but with the plight of pollinators and other important creatures fresh in our mind, it's wise to remember that regionally native species are especially important in helping to maintain the biodiversity around us. Using more wildflowers in the landscape is a good way to give greater ecological purpose to the garden.

Here are a few of our favorite regional native wildflowers:

- **Black-eyed Susan**, *Rudbeckia hirta*, grows to 1-2'; has showy yellow daisy-like flowers with black center cones; and is a favorite of many small birds.
- **Brown-Eyed Susan (PHOTO)**, *Rudbeckia triloba*, grows to 3-4'; has 1" yellow flowers with brown centers in late summer; is a good cut flower; and tolerates some shade.
- **Wild Larkspur**, *Delphinium virescens*, grows to 2-3'; has vertical spikes of delicate blue and white flowers spring to early summer; and goes dormant mid-summer so allow it to reseed.
- **Plains Coreopsis**, *Coreopsis tinctoria*, grows to 2-3'; has wiry stems and needle-like foliage with masses of small yellow-orange flowers in early summer; and is easy, tough and dependable.
- **Wild Petunia**, *Ruellia humilis*, grows to 15"; has hairy foliage and beautiful lavender flowers that close in the heat of the day.
- **Prairie Ragwort**, *Senecio* or *Packera plattensis*, grows to 12-18"; has bright yellow, daisy-like flowers on upright plants in mid-spring; goes dormant in summer; and is ideal for naturalizing.
- **Shell-leaf Penstemon**, *Penstemon grandiflorus*, grows to 2-3'; has tubular lavender flowers in late May; and is easy to harvest for reseeding.
- **Bitterweed**, *Helenium amarum*, grows to 12-18"; is a dense, bushy plant with thin, wiry foliage; has masses of yellow flowers late summer to frost; and is very tough and dependable.
- **Prairie Coneflower**, *Ratibida columnifera*, grows to 1-2'; its deep yellow petals droop around an upright cone in early summer, resembling a Mexican hat.
- **Purple Prairie Clover**, *Dalea purpurea*, grows to 1-2'; cones of lavender spikes top the wiry stems mid-summer.



- **Rocky Mountain Bee Plant**, *Cleome serrulata*, grows to 2-3'; is a western native with wispy pink flowers on bushy stems.
- **Pale Purple Coneflower**, *Echinacea pallida*, grows to 2-3'; drooping lavender petals surround a brown center cone and it blooms from late spring to early summer.
- **Pitcher Sage**, *Salvia azurea*, grows to 3-5'; is a tallgrass prairie salvia with sky blue flowers late summer.
- **Curly-Cup Gumweed**, *Grindelia Squarrosa*, grows to 1-2'; and is a tough-as-nails western native with yellow daisy flowers, shiny foliage and sticky flower heads.
- **Blue Flax**, *Linum lewisii*, grows to 1-2'; has light blue flowers on wiry stems in early spring; and is common on roadsides.

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