



Creating a Wildflower Meadow

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Introduction

When arriving to the Americas in 1513, Juan Ponce de Leon named this area La Florida, the “Land of Flowers.” Wildflowers became ubiquitous to Florida because of its soil and climate diversity. Wildflowers in Northeast Florida are very diverse and prolific that provide an important ecosystem service and aesthetic beauty.

The importance of wildflowers in Florida’s landscape became apparent in the 1930s when the Federation of Garden Clubs began seeding wildflowers along Florida’s roadways (Figure 1). In the 1960s, Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson began her conservation and beautification movement throughout the United States to improve the beauty and mental health of our communities. Lady Bird Johnson once said, “Ugliness is so grim. A little beauty, something that is lovely, I think, can help create harmony which will lessen tensions.”

Creating a wildflower meadow takes some patience and time, but the low-maintenance outcome creates a beautiful landscape that provides many environmental benefits.

Design

When designing a wildflower meadow, think about where you live. What are the environmental conditions in the area you intend on planting? Additionally, if you live in an area with a homeowners’ association (HOA), be aware that wildflowers may have a “messy” appearance at times as you wait for seeds to develop and self-seed.

Here are a few tips/suggestions for creating your wildflower meadow:

- Put meadow in side or backyard.
- Plan for seasonal changes by selecting wildflower mixes that produce year-round color.
- Include paths, evergreen shrubs, and other plants to create a structure to the design.
- Plant fragrant wildflowers or herbs to create a meadow that is enticing to multiple senses.
- Include birdbaths, bird feeders, or other garden pieces to add interest and art to your wildflower meadow.
- Personalize your garden with a sign such as “All Pollinators Welcome Here,” “Butterfly Highway,” or “Wildflowers: Don’t Mess with Us.”



Figure 1: A wildflower meadow in Live Oak, Florida, attracts many beneficial insects and creates a beautiful landscape.

To Create a Meadow

Preparation of the site is important. To help prepare your landscape for wildflower seeds, choose one of the following strategies:

- Remove grass with shovel or sod remover.
- Cover the area with cardboard/newspaper for several months to kill existing turfgrass or other plants. A 2"-4" layer of additional compost on top of cardboard/newspaper can make process more effective.
- For sunny turfgrass areas, cut/scalp turfgrass with a lawn mower and cover with a tarp. Anchor the edges and wait approximately 2-3 months for all the turfgrass to die.
- Herbicide an area you desire to be planted, wait for everything to die off, and clean out dead material before planting. Be sure to follow the label's instructions.

Do not till since weed seeds will be brought to the surface. Rake up excess vegetation. You may hand sow or use a landscape spreader to broadcast your seeds in your prepared area. Mix your wildflower seeds with sand, it will allow for easier sowing (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A wildflower meadow is being sowed with a landscape spreader that is typically used for fertilizer. The wildflower seeds are mixed with sand and spread onto a turfgrass area treated with an herbicide.

Seed Selection

Select seeds from local seed sources for the growing conditions you have. For assistance, see *Common Native Wildflowers of Florida*: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep061>.

Avoid commercially packaged seed mixes unless you recognize the species included in the mix as suited to our area; you may need to adjust the sowing time. Some seed mixes may not be for our growing zone or may include undesirable plant seeds. Seed mixes may contain as little as 10% seed with the rest being filler.

Seed Saving & Storage

Collect when stem below the seed head is brown. Do not wait until entire stem is brown. Snip seed heads into paper bag. Seeds collected in plastic bags will mold unless they are completely dry. Shake seeds out of flower heads or process through a sieve or strainer. Store seeds in a cool dark, low humidity room. When thoroughly dry, place in a sealed container. Dark glass is best for storage and desiccants may be added to containers to help with drying.

When to Plant a Wildflower Meadow

For natives wildflowers, sow in our fall months. Late October is an ideal planting time for the Alachua County area. For non-natives sow hardy species in the fall and non-hardy species in the spring.

Caring for Meadow

It is your choice to actively care for or sit back and watch. In general, meadows should be mowed once a year at the end of the active growing season to prevent bushes and trees from taking over. Seedlings may appear any time after seed is spread.



Learn to recognize what you planted as seedlings and plant specific wildflowers in marked areas so you can learn to recognize them.

Weeding may be needed to minimize unwanted competition from other plants. A good guideline is to remove weeds you recognize; you do not want to unintentionally remove wildflower seedlings. Over time, you will become more confident and comfortable at recognizing your wildflower seedlings in your landscape.

Do not deadhead. This will prevent self-seeding. Mulching is not recommended because most wildflower seeds need light to germinate. If you do wish to mulch, consider using a light covering of pine straw. Seeds can drift down to soil through matrix of needles but most need exposure to light in order to germinate. Keep the margins of meadow neat by mowing, edging with a path or evergreen shrubs.

Additional Resources

Florida Wildflower Cooperative

<http://www.floridawildflowers.com/pages/Planting-Information.html>

Wildflower Images

Images available at http://www.flawildflowers.org/resources/pdfs/pdf10/SeedlingImageProject_Report-Ver2007-96DPI_Images.pdf