

HOW TO ESTABLISH ANNUAL WILDFLOWERS



Annual wildflowers can give a quick and often spectacularly colourful cover on temporary soil dumps, temporarily cleared areas and the peripheral areas of construction sites and industrial areas. They are easily established at low cost. The visual impact of a mass of poppies, cornflowers and marigolds distracts public attention from the otherwise unsightly aspects of such sites.

They can also be used on landscape projects to provide a quick visual display while the establishment of biennial and perennial plants proceeds at a slower pace. This enables the client to obtain an easily perceptible benefit in the first season after planting.

SPECIES

The most widely used annual wildflower display is produced by sowing a balanced mixture of cornfield wildflowers. These are species which made cornfields colourful (but less productive) in the days before the invention of herbicides. As a result of herbicide use, several of these species have become quite rare. The following species are robust and give the greatest visual impact:

Poppy	<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>
Cornflower	<i>Centaurea cyanus</i>
Corn marigold	<i>Chrysanthemum segetum</i>
Corn cockle	<i>Agrostemma githago</i>
Corn chamomile	<i>Anthemis arvensis</i>

For smaller, more formal areas, the following low growing species are appropriate:

Birds-eye speedwell	<i>Anagallis arvensis</i>
Prickly poppy	<i>Papaver argemone</i>
Venus looking-glass	<i>Legousia hybrida</i>
Lesser snapdragon	<i>Misopates orontium</i>
Field madder	<i>Sherardia arvensis</i>
Cowwheat	<i>Melampyrum pratense</i> *
Cowherb	<i>Vaccaria hispanica</i> *
Love in a mist	<i>Nigella arvensis</i> *

* indicates a species which is not of British origin.

SOIL TYPE

The robust annual wildflowers listed above are tolerant of a wide range of soil types, from well consolidated crushed masonry and crushed brick, gravel heaps and weathered chalk to good agricultural soil. On the poorer, dry substrates, poppy and corn cockle will grow best, with corn marigold and cornflower dominating on wetter soils. Best results, particularly on very dry substrates are obtained from a September sowing to ensure plant establishment before the soil dries out in early summer. On moister substrates and natural soils, both autumn and spring sowings are effective.

METHOD

Smooth the contours of the site to permit preparation of a seed bed. If weeds are present, spray with glyphosate (eg Roundup). Prepare a seedbed with at least 5cm depth of loose, fine particles. Broadcast the seed mixture evenly onto the seedbed at a rate of 20-30 kilos per hectare (8-10 kilos per acre, 2-3 grams per square yard). Use the higher seed rate where there are reasons to anticipate competition from weeds, such as on fertile soils or sites where weeds have seeded in previous seasons. Harrow very lightly and roll the seedbed.

Fertiliser application is distinctly detrimental on normal soils (it encourages the plants to grow tall and leafy at the expense of early flower production, and encourages weeds). However on rubble, gravel or chalk substrates with no admixture of soil, 200kg. per hectare of an NPK fertiliser immediately after sowing, and for a September sowing, a second application in the early spring can greatly speed up plant establishment.

TIMING

The best time for sowing is late August to November, but sowings up to the end of April can be successful on soils with adequate water holding capacity. Flowering usually commences in June and continues to September.

SEED COSTS

At 20 kilos per hectare and £50 per kilo, seed costs are £1000 per hectare or £400 per acre. A small cost in comparison to the other costs in a civil engineering project, and well remunerated by the goodwill generated by the colourful flowers in midsummer.

MANAGEMENT

No post-sowing management is required until late summer. Depending on the season and on site conditions the wildflowers will commence blooming in June and continue into August. In many cases the site can look as spectacular as the picture on this leaflet .

REGENERATION

At the end of the flowering season and after the seed has been shed the plant residues can be chopped and disked into the soil, whereupon a further season's crop of annual wildflowers will regenerate from the seed of the previous season. However, some topping up with new seed to increase floral diversity might be desirable to increase the frequency of any species which did not do well in the first season.

If it is desired to maintain a site in annual wildflowers for several years, cut and remove the dying vegetation in August. Allow any weeds to regrow and spray with glyphosate in late August or the first week of September. Three days after spraying, rotavate or power harrow the area and re sow the annual wildflower seed.

The second year of an annual wildflower display can be better than the first. However, there is a tendency for the area to be invaded by weeds or perennial grasses which increase in frequency in subsequent years. For this reason annual wildflowers can be treated as a visually attractive temporary cover and either undersown with a grass and perennial wildflower mixture or managed by mowing to encourage progression to grassland in subsequent years.

SEED & ADVICE

Seed can be obtained from Herbiseed, who will be happy to advise on species suitability for your situation.

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