

Seeding Wildflowers in Truckee and Tahoe

Throwing out “wildflower seed” as an inexpensive and maintenance free method of planting a riot of color in the garden is possible. It can be successful. After all, wild plants grow and bloom every year in all sorts of conditions. Consider though, that out of millions of seeds, from wild plants, very few germinate and fewer still make it to flowering maturity. Weather varies every season and every year, some encourage higher than average successes. A few seeds find tiny spots of fertile soil, spaces between rocks with moisture, or they are sheltered from the harsher elements in some other way.

Gardeners hope for far better odds than Mother Nature offers. We improve various conditions in large and small ways to increase our chances of success. In order to germinate and thrive, seeds and the resulting seedlings need water, air, sunlight, nutrients, and suitable soil. In Truckee we have irregular rain and snow, low humidity, overly intense sunlight, and nutrient-poor mineral base material, barely “soil”.

Anyone is welcome to simply throw seed onto a sunny slope and see what comes up. Occasionally the results are astounding.

Most of our local native plants disperse their seeds in the late summer and into fall. The soil is warm from a season of sunlight and we begin to see a few storms. If the seeds fall in the right spot and the storms are regular enough, seeds may germinate and seedlings can establish ample root systems before winter. If fall storms yield to a long Indian summer and early winter drought, young seedlings can dry up. Seeding in fall often gives great results and less poor results, depending on the weather. Planting in late summer and watering regularly until snowfall can greatly increase successes.

Some seed pods dry and open waiting until early winter storms blow their seeds out to be covered with snow. Seeds lie dormant in the cold soil until late winter when they germinate with the moisture under melting snow.

If the seedlings are lucky, moisture will continue long enough in spring for the young plants’ roots to reach deep into the soil. Most seeds fall where the soil dries too quickly. If you plant seeds in the late fall, just before the snow flies (or on

top of the first 2-3” of snow), make sure you are ready to keep the seeds irrigated in the spring as soon as the snow melts.

It would take a uniquely evolved plant to create a seed dispersal mechanism that stays tall and dry through our winter snows and opens to throw its seed in spring as the snow is melting. In spring, days are lengthening, temperatures are rising, soils are moist and melting snow can continuously release water into the ground for weeks or months. Seeds planted in late winter will likely receive April and May rain and snow showers. One colleague plants wildflower seed atop the snow when it is down to a few inches deep. This method has merit; especially at the higher elevations where days will surely be much warmer by the time the snow is melted to expose the bare ground. Again, make sure you are ready to irrigate before the soils begin to dry.

If seeds are sown in summer, do not let them dry out, at all. A moment of desiccation as the roots are emerging from the seed can kill seedlings. There is no second chance with germination. Early in spring, seeds are less likely to dry out but with later plantings, in warmer temperatures, seeds germinate and seedlings will grow faster. We encourage providing occasional “simulated afternoon thundershowers” if we aren’t having any naturally. As the seedlings grow, water less and less frequently to encourage deeper roots to keep following water as it recedes further into the ground. In summer, wildflower blooms will last much longer if they receive occasional water.

It would be even more challenging to find a plant that could release its precious seeds several times a year in the hope that one of those times would have ideal weather conditions.

We can do that. Try dividing your seed into 5 envelopes. Using compost and fertilizers mentioned below, try spreading some when you get the seed and then watering. Spread some in September and irrigate regularly. Spread some at Halloween (no water). Spread some at Thanksgiving. And save some overwinter for planting at Valentines day (or the first time you glimpse bare soil in the area you are planting). This is maximizing your odds of success with multiple attempts.



Natural meadows are created over thousands of years by a wide range of species in the few locations with decent soils. As meadow grasses and other plants grow, die and decompose, the soils get better and better. A large part of the soil improvement is due to the grasses that make up 60-80% of most meadows. Clovers and other legumes are also responsible for these improvements.

Most of us here have poor mineral soils. When planting wildflower seed, you can put in as much effort as you would for a new lawn or you can simply improve the circumstances a little to increase your chances of success. By raking in a light layer of mature compost, you are adding beneficial composting microbes to the soil. You are also adding humus, the mineralized result of composted organic material that helps soil form structure, retain water and nutrients, and generally support life.

Mixing seed with a compost, like Kellogg's Topper, before broadcasting improves seed distribution vs. spreading pinches of seed by hand. The seed-to-compost contact yields higher rates of germination. The seeds should be just at the surface or less than one eighth of an inch below any compost.

Mulching over the seeded area with a layer free of arborist wood chips (2-4") or straw (2-3"), or even pine needles (2-3") after seeding will provide shade, slow wind, shatter rain drops, and hold moisture. Think of it as a temporary shade-house for propagating seedlings. Wood chip mulch reduces irrigation requirements. Placing a few (or many) softball-sized rocks over the mulch will help keep it from blowing away and the rocks will retain heat, shade the ground, and concentrate moisture beneath them. Seedlings usually emerge and grow most quickly around rocks. Wildflower "mats" can work because they offer moisture retaining loose mulch but they are also many times more expensive than seed, compost, fertilizer, and arborist chips for a given area.

Use an organic fertilizer when seeding. Biosol is primarily a revegetation fertilizer. We use Biosol with fertilizers like G&B that inoculate the soils with beneficial microbes and add nutrients. Plants slowly receive food by way of microbial activity. Roots and plants are healthier and the soil is more productive when organic fertilizer is added at the time of

seeding so new roots can form beneficial microbial associations from the start.

If your goal is to create a wild meadow, consider adding a few species of native grass along with clover. Fine fescues are well-behaved low grasses. We offer a Native Grass Blend with lower growing hardy species of a variety of colors and textures. White Dutch clover is beneficial for the soil fertility and structure. These seeds are relatively inexpensive to add. "Meadow in a can" usually contains very little seed, much of the seed they do contain is grass and clover all mixed with filler. Meadows in the Sierra and Great Basin only occur where there is long-term soil moisture so maintaining a "meadow" will likely require additional irrigation.

We have many individual seed species in bulk and several wildflower mixtures that we've made, modified, and curated for decades: **Sierra Natives**, mostly perennials that won't bloom for 2-3 years but will last for decades without care. **Mountain Native** mix has perennials and summer annuals and is intended to not look out-of-place in a Sierra garden but provide a bit more color. If your goal is color, **Truckee Garden** is a riot of color, though with few natives. Add bulbs in the fall for carefree early color. We also have **Native Penstemon** and **Native Lupine** blends.

We often offer several native bulbs in containers and a few as just bulbs in fall. Many non-native bulbs look like wildflowers and work wonderfully in a wildflower garden. Add a few 4" pots of some of the many native perennial wildflowers we offer for some near-instant gratification. A planted native columbine, for example, will produce many flowers and 1000's of seeds in its first year in the ground. Seed you plant may take 3-4 years before it begins to bloom.

As with all of gardening (and life), it is a sliding scale of possibilities, the more effort you expend in preparation, the greater your successes and the less effort you will need to expend in the future. Do what you can, within reason, to increase your odds of success. Or, when the risk is only a couple of bucks, maybe you can afford to play by Nature's odds now and then. -e

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