



SOWING AND GROWING CALIFORNIA NATIVE WILDFLOWERS

PREPARING THE SITE

Remove existing weeds or grass without digging or tilling any deeper than three to four inches; doing so will most likely unearth deeply embedded, dormant weed seeds and encourage them to germinate, thus increasing the weed growth! It is best to leave these deeply buried seeds undisturbed in a dormant state beneath the soil.

SOWING THE SEED

METHOD I: Horticultural Sand

Combine one part seed to three parts horticultural sand (“sharp sand,” made of washed, lime-free quartzite). Scatter the mixture evenly. This method is effective because the sand helps protect the seed from hungry birds. A single layer of pea gravel can also guard seed from birds “waiting in the wings.” Alternatively, if desired, bird netting can be attached to stakes and stretched across the top and around sides of the area.

METHOD II: Scatter & Cover

Scatter seed evenly and cover with a bit of soil (either your own garden soil or a light potting soil will work just fine). Note: The seed should not be sown deeper than 1/8” beneath the soil surface. Apply just enough soil to cover; do not “bury” the seed.

METHOD III: Scatter & Rake

Scatter seed and then rake in with a standard garden leaf rake, raking gently so that seed doesn’t get pushed down too deeply under the soil surface. Horticultural sand or a light potting soil may be used to cover the seed, but keep in mind that the seed should be sown just below (approximately 1/8”) the soil surface.

TIPS FOR SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Clay Soil: Loosen up the top couple inches and smooth over. After seed is scattered, use the backside of a leaf rake to gently beat the seed into the soil surface (taking care not to overdo it and injure the seed). This will push the seed down just slightly into soil crevices. (Raking on hard clay soil may be ineffective or create a clumping effect, wherein the seed is unable to germinate because it is buried under chunks of soil.)

Slopes: After seeds are sown, be sure to water them in immediately and thoroughly. So that seeds don’t wash down the slope with the rains, it can be helpful to gently walk on the soil surface to secure the seeds into soil—as long as this action can be performed gently and without slippage. Placing a flat board over sown areas and then walking on it will probably cause less soil disturbance than feet alone!

Pets and foot traffic: If the area is frequented by active pets or receives foot traffic, cordon or block it off while the wildflowers are establishing.

TIP: Plant a small sample of the seed in pots, so that you can learn to identify which seedlings are the desired wildflowers and which are weeds to be removed as your wildflower garden progresses.

WATERING AND CARE

“Water in” your seed immediately after sowing. Use a shower nozzle (“water breaker”), a fan spray hose attachment, or a sprinkler with a soft, even spray (from your irrigation system or an oscillating hose attachment). Water very thoroughly but gently, passing back and forth over the area so that seed stays firmly in place; avoid creating pooling and flooding effects.

In the beginning, several thorough watering sessions are very important, as they help secure the seed in the soil and ensure firm seed-to-soil-contact. The seed should not be pressed and buried deeply into the soil, nor should it be sitting loose and unprotected on the soil surface.

It is recommended to sow the seed in advance of fall rains, so that by the time storms come more frequently, the seed is well-secured and set in the soil and will not be washed away.

Keep the soil constantly moist (but not waterlogged) until a few inches of growth are visible. Then water as needed whenever the top couple of inches of soil are dry. *Note:* Even if intermittent rainstorms occur, seedlings must be watered between rain events—do not allow un-germinated seeds or very small, delicate seedlings to dry out for too long. They need that constant moisture to become well established.

Once your wildflowers are up and blooming, occasional deep watering will extend the duration of the flowering period.

Marvel as insects, birds and neighbors flock to the garden habitat you have created!

HOW MUCH WATER?

Keep the soil moist using the watering method described above until you see that the seedlings are growing actively. This does not imply a heavy twice or thrice daily watering (overwatering can cause the seeds to rot out or fungus to form), but a gentle, thorough watering every one to three days. Don't panic if the soil begins to dry out slightly, it will be okay as long as it gets a good watering very soon thereafter. If it rains, you won't need to conduct supplemental watering for a few days or longer, depending on how significant the rainfall is (keep in mind that light rainfall often does not penetrate the soil deeply enough to reach the roots).

You will be able to tell if you've been under or overwatering because the soil will give visual clues: Does it look constantly soaked and waterlogged? Does it appear muddy or clumpy? Or does it appear very flaky and dry with a granular appearance like you would observe in summer?

To test the moisture level, stick a finger into the soil up to the knuckle. If it feels dry, watering is called for. If it feels damp or moist, watering can wait another day. As the season progresses, you won't have to do this manual test every day. You will get to know your wildflower seedlings and their cues, and will gain confidence in your judgment of how often to water.

As the seedlings develop, they will also give you visual cues about their needs. They should appear healthy. Are they vigorous in color as well as structure? Shriveling, wilting, or a weak appearance are often cues that more water should be applied. If they appear extremely faded, it can be an indication that they need more water (note that the California poppy foliage naturally has a sage green tone). Are they continuing to grow at a steady rate? If they stay the same size for weeks and weeks during the growing season, more water will most likely help boost their development.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

Native wildflower species :

Wildflowers of California: A Month-by-Month Guide, by Laird R. Blackwell (UC Press, 2012)

The Native Plant Library at theodorepayne.org (click on Native Gardening).

About growing wildflowers from seed in the garden:

Gardener's Guide to California Wildflowers, by Kevin Connelly (Theodore Payne Foundation, 1991).