



SOWING CALIFORNIA NATIVE WILD FLOWERS

Theodore Payne Foundation for Wild Flowers and Native Plants

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WHEN TO SOW

Early- to mid-fall (mid-October through late November) is the ideal time to sow annual wildflowers. Seed may still be sown December through mid-February, but earlier sowing mimics the natural cycle of an annual, which lives its complete lifecycle within the span of a year: in summer, the plant drops seed; in fall, when natural rainfall occurs, the seed germinates; in winter the seedling develops, and during spring it reaches full bloom.

Annual wildflower species may come back each year, starting from seed that was dropped from the parent plant during the summer.

PREPARING THE SITE

For optimal results, sow seed on a cleared area of soil. Remove existing weeds or grass without digging or tilling any deeper than three to four inches; deeper digging may unearth embedded, dormant weed seeds and encourage them to germinate, thereby increasing weed growth! It is best to leave these deeply buried seeds undisturbed in a dormant state beneath the soil.

Seeds can be sown amongst mulch as long as it is not too thick. They need light, air and soil contact to germinate well, and thus won't succeed if scattered directly over thick mulch or if buried under a deep cover of mulch. If you wish to sow in mulch, sprinkle seeds between the pieces of a shallow, single mulch layer. Wood chips or pea gravel are best for this purpose.

SOWING THE SEED – THREE OPTIONS

Method I - Horticultural Sand: Combine one part seed to three parts horticultural sand, a.k.a. "sharp sand" made from washed lime-free quartzite and similar to builder's sand. (**Note:** Do not use sandbox play sand; those particles are too fine to mix well with and protect the scattered wildflower seed. Do not use beach sand; it contains salts that hinder germination.) Scatter the seed/sand mixture evenly. This method helps to protect the seed from hungry birds and serves to cover the seed.

Method II - Scatter & Cover: Scatter bare seed evenly over gently raked soil and cover with a bit of soil (either your own garden soil, if it is not heavy clay, or a light potting soil). **Note:** Do not bury the seed deeply; apply just enough soil so that seed is approximately 1/8" beneath the surface.

Method III - Scatter & Rake: Scatter seed and then rake in with a standard garden leaf rake, raking gently so that seed doesn't get displaced or pushed too deeply beneath the soil surface. Horticultural sand or a light garden or potting soil may be used to cover the seed, but keep in mind that the seed should be approximately 1/8" beneath the soil surface.

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SOWING THE SEED, continued

Additional notes: The “tic-tac-toe” method works well to scatter seed evenly; scatter first going in one direction, then do the second sowing perpendicular to the first.

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

SOWING THE SEED: TIPS FOR SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Clay Soil: Using a rock rake, loosen up the top couple inches of soil and smooth over. After seed is scattered, use the backside of a standard garden leaf rake to gently beat the seed into the shallow crevices in the soil surface (taking care not to overdo it and injure the seed).

Slopes: Sprinkle your slope well before sowing so that the seed has a better chance of sticking. After scattering, water in immediately and thoroughly. It can be helpful to gently walk on the soil surface to secure the seeds into place – so long as this action can be performed gently and without slippage. Placing a flat board over sown areas and then walking on it can also be effective.

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

Birds: If you are sowing in an area that birds frequent, use sowing methods that mix seed with horticultural sand or where seed is lightly covered with soil. This can help protect seed from bird predation. If desired, bird netting (available at nurseries and hardware stores) can be attached to stakes and stretched across the top of the area to decrease accessibility.

WATERING AND CARE

Water in your seeds immediately after sowing. Left dry, seed will most likely desiccate or be consumed by animals. Use either a “water breaker” (shower-nozzle style), fan spray hose-end attachment, or a sprinkler head with a soft, even spray (from your irrigation system or an oscillating hose-end sprinkler).

Water very thoroughly but gently, passing back and forth over the area so that seed stays firmly in place; avoid creating soil divots, pooling or flooding effects.

If there is a dry spell between rains, be sure to water! Seeds must receive regular moisture for optimal germination.

Keep the soil consistently moist (but not waterlogged, as this can cause the seeds to rot) until a few inches of growth are visible, and then water as needed.