

Wildflower Wonders

By Katie Geist, CSU Teller County Master Gardener and Mark J. Platten, CSU Extension Director, Teller County

Wildflowers bring to mind hiking in the Colorado high country with warm sunshine on your shoulders and bright, blue skies above. Crossing a mountain meadow full of color is as joyful an experience as reaching your final hiking destination. Planting a wildflower garden can bring you the similar delight of a natural looking, informal garden every summer in your own backyard.

The lack of snow and rain in Teller County during the past winter and spring has made it tough on the wildflowers this summer. The recent rains will increase the abundance of wildflowers through August. On a recent hike to the Crags I was pleased to see several varieties blooming – columbine, wild geranium, harebells, penstemon, chiming bells, nodding onions, and mariposa lilies.

Wildflowers are not necessarily native flowers. Many wildflower mixes available for purchase include non-native plants. Some mixes may include grasses for added interest and erosion control. A wildflower planting will change its look throughout the growing season as different plants bloom. Pay attention because some wildflower plants can be aggressive and eventually take over your garden.

Here are some tips for planting wildflowers. Choose a mix of wildflowers that is suitable for your property. Consider if you'll be planting it on a hot, sunny, windy slope or a cool, shaded hill. Soil type and quality is another consideration. A soil test may be the first step on identifying what's missing from your soil. Most wildflowers do best in well-drained, aerated soil.

Fall is an excellent time to plant wildflowers since winter's snow and cold help the seeds germinate the following spring. Watering may be necessary if we have another dry winter. Lightly break up the soil with a rake and smooth out before spreading your seeds. If your soil is compacted you may need to improve the soil with organic matter such as compost, or sphagnum peat moss, into the top six inches.

Scatter the seeds over the soil following the instructions on your seed mix. For an even distribution of wildflower seed, mix six parts dry sand with one part seed and spread by hand if seeding a small area or a seed spreader for larger areas. Lightly rake the seeds into the soil and tamp the soil with your feet. Planting the seeds too deep is a primary reason for failed germination, so follow the package directions. Water as needed and hope for early and frequent snowfall during the winter.

Next spring you may have to water if we have a repeat of last winter's weather. Otherwise you can look forward to watching what germinates and grows in your garden. One last tip – if you want to tell your wildflowers from weeds next spring, plant a pot full of the seed mix that you used so that you can see what the seedlings look like.

Here are a few resources for more information on wildflowers.

<https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/garden/07233.pdf>

<https://wp.natsci.colostate.edu/herbarium/>

<https://cnhp.colostate.edu/conativeplantsdp/>

<http://www.botanicgardens.org>

<http://www.tellerparkcd.org/grass--wildflower-seed.html>

For questions regarding horticulture questions; please call the master gardeners at 686-7961, visit our website at <https://teller.extension.colostate.edu/programs/gardening-horticulture/> or visit our booth at the Woodland Park Farmers' Market.