Wildflower gardens can be environmentally friendly

Driving across Oklahoma it’s not unusual to see patches of wildflowers along the highway. Wildflower gardens can make a great addition to any landscape with their bright colors and variety of flowers.

In some ways, wildflower gardens are more environmentally friendly than traditional gardens. Although most plants will survive for a time in any given environment without human intervention, wildflowers will need the right conditions to perform in the desired way. Fertilizers and other amendments may be needed when the environmental conditions aren’t ideal. Once established, wildflowers should grow well because they’re accustomed to the soils and growing conditions of the local climate.

Late fall is ideal for planting a wildflower garden. If considering planting one, it’s important to understand seed dormancy. Many native species have evolved only to germinate when conditions are just right, such as after a heavy rain or a fire event. Typically, seeds need a cold and wet period to break dormancy, also known as stratification. Dormancy can be broken artificially by placing seeds in a moist growing medium in the refrigerator for about four to eight weeks.

Some seed companies sell seeds that have already been put through this process. However, others don’t do this because untreated seeds have a longer shelf life. Here in Oklahoma, it’s recommended to plant your seeds in the late fall to ensure the seeds go through a natural stratification or other dormancy-breaking process. In areas that receive more snow, a post-frost/snowfall planting is ideal. Another benefit is a late-fall planting won’t interfere with more pressing spring garden tasks.

What do gardeners need to do to establish a wildflower garden? As with any garden, site selection is essential. Consider factors such as sun and wind exposure, drainage, site topography, site access for maintenance and available irrigation. Clearing any vegetation from the site is important. This process can take some time. Non-selective post-emergent herbicides are an effective way to kill perennial weedy plants growing in the area and multiple treatments may be necessary. After tilling, the area should be left relatively undisturbed for enough time to see new weed growth, which should then be treated.

Successful seed sowing will lead to a full garden with a balance of the selected species throughout the space. If the space is large, separate the area into equal parts. Combine your seeds and mix well, then divide the seeds into equal parts – the same number as the garden space is divided. Next, add moistened filler material, such as sawdust, compost, peat moss, sand or rice
hulls, to each section of seed. Add three parts filler material to each section of seed to create a broadcast mix. Broadcast the mix over each area and lightly tamp the seed with your feet or other tools to ensure good seed-soil contact without burying the seeds too deeply.

Remember, wildflower gardens aren’t set-it-and-forget-it efforts. Once the seeds are planted, keep an eye out for cool-season weeds. Once the garden starts growing next spring, it’ll need maintenance just like a normal garden, depending on the overall aesthetic and purpose of the garden.

Wildflower gardens are gaining in popularity among gardeners seeking ways to enhance native ecosystems in urban areas while also seeking to reduce the resources needed to keep their gardens beautiful. This type of gardening lends itself to bringing a part of Oklahoma’s natural heritage into the backyard and demonstrating the diversity of the Oklahoma flora.

[Oklahoma State University Extension](https://okstate.edu) offers more information on a [wildflower gardening](https://okstate.edu).