

The Wildflower Top 10

By Arvind Kumar

When the first European settlers came to California, they were awestruck by the beauty and expanse of the local wildflowers. In her book *Gardening With a Wild Heart*, Judith Lowry quotes the words of an early settler, Jeff Mayfield, whose family came to the San Joaquin Valley in 1850:

"As we passed below the hills the whole plain was covered with great patches of rose, yellow, scarlet, orange, and blue. The colors did not seem to mix to any great extent. Each kind of flower liked a certain kind of soil best, and some of the patches of one color were a mile or more across ... My daddy had traveled a great deal, and it was not easy to get him excited about wild flowers or pretty scenery. But he said that he would not have believed that such a place existed if he had not seen it himself."

It is said sailors at sea could tell they had arrived in California by the color of its hills: in spring they turned every shade in the rainbow.

By the time I came to California, 130 years after Jeff Mayfield, the miles and miles of wildflowers had given way to farms, ranches, cities, and highways. Today, the California landscape survives in its original form only in a handful of places like Coyote Ridge, Carrizo Plains, and Antelope Valley.

We can't turn the clock back, but we *can* bring those glorious California wildflowers back into our home gardens. They are extremely easy to cultivate. Bed preparation is a cinch, cultural requirements few, and the blooms spectacular. The only area in which they need help is protection from invasive weeds and predators. Give them the right conditions, and they will return year after year, just as they once did in all likelihood in the very same spot your house now stands.

So how can you introduce California wildflowers into your garden? There are two basic approaches:

IN SITU: Grow them by scattering the seeds in beds directly. To do this, prepare the bed first by thoroughly weeding it. Remove organic matter like fallen leaves or mulch. You don't need to loosen the soil or turn it over; just scrape the soil lightly to create nooks and crannies in which the seed can settle. Broadcast seed over the bed. Lightly tamp the soil to establish good seed-to-soil contact. Water well.

For wildflowers like the California Poppy which have no known predators and whose tender tap roots do not transplant well, this approach is preferable. The best time to do this is in late fall, when the rains can do the irrigating.

GERMINATE AND TRANSPLANT: This approach is more efficient and improves one's chances of success if one is planting late in the season, or using plants which are often the targets of predation. Germinate the plants first in 4" pots, and tend them until their roots reach the bottom of the pot and leafy growth becomes significant. Then transplant them into the ground. The bigger the plant, the better it can withstand predation.

The only requirement is sun and moisture, both of which are provided by nature in the California winter. If it hasn't rained in a while, you can help the plants along by overhead watering. Weekly water, either from the rains or the garden hose, will ensure strong plant growth and fabulous blooms.

If the weed seed load is high, the weeds will germinate along with the wildflowers. It is critical to remove them as they come up so that the native wildflowers can gain a foothold. Without this help, the weeds will win.

One thing these wildflowers don't need is fertilizer. They have evolved in California's soil; added fertilizer only contributes to leafy growth but does nothing for their blooms. If you want them to reseed and return next year, avoid organic amendments or potting soil; they do best in normal clay soil which retains moisture better.

When selecting wildflowers for this Top 10, I used the following broad criteria:

1. easy to grow
2. high survival rate
3. reseed and return year after year
4. locally native to San Jose and the neighboring areas

With that introduction, let's begin the countdown. May we have a drum roll, please ...

10. **Seep Monkeyflower (*Mimulus guttatus*):** This moisture loving annual is perfectly suited for a wet corner of the garden, perhaps near a leaky faucet. It has bright yellow, snapdragon-like flowers that native bees love to visit. It is a profuse reseeder. With added water, it will stay green the year round. Great for containers.

9. **Grand Linanthus (*Linanthus grandiflorus*):** This plant bears beautiful, long lasting white/pink flowers in spring. It was once common in Santa Clara Valley. Although it tolerates clay, it prefers fast-draining, gritty soil in which it freely reseeds. Plant it in masses if you want to enjoy its subtle fragrance.

8. **Blazing Star (*Mentzelia lindleyi*):** If you've ever seen one of these flowers in bloom, you'll realize how appropriately they are named. Satiny yellow petals with red centers surround a crown of a hundred stamens. This drought-loving plant tolerates water during its period of active growth; discontinue watering once it starts flowering. Expect it to continue blooming for up to two months. Looks best in masses.

7. **Elegant Clarkia (*Clarkia unguiculata*):** In late spring, when the air is warm and the ground dry, this tall plant is covered with pink-magenta blossoms. The unusual claw-shaped petals give it its Latin species name. In the wild it grows to only 2' or so, but in a garden it can get up to 6'. It likes a sunny spot, and looks best in the back of the bed, or against a wall or fence. Native bees can't get enough of it.

6. **Chinese Houses (*Collinsia heterophylla*):** This is one of the most charming of local wildflowers, with alternating white and purple petals arranged pagoda-style, hence the common name. It prefers shade, and reseeds profusely. If you have a snail/slug problem, you will need to be vigilant in protecting the tender seedlings.

5. **Meadowfoam (*Limnanthes douglasii*):** This lovely low growing plant prefers a flat, sunny area, and thrives with moisture. Mass it in the front of the bed for a bright green groundcover all through winter and spring. When it blooms, its delicately veined white and yellow petals nearly obscure the foliage. One of my favorites.

4. **Ruby Chalice Clarkia (*Clarkia rubicunda*):** Another late blooming wildflower that lights up the California countryside with its pink blossoms which look lovely in the morning and late afternoon sun. With its mounding habit, even a few plants can cover a large area.

3. **Goldfields (*Lasthenia glabrata*):** This low growing wildflower covers local ridge tops with a golden carpet each spring. The flowers resemble tiny

yellow daisies, and blooms last and last, for up to two months. If the site is undisturbed, it will return year after year.

2. **Globe Gilia (*Gilia capitata*):** This wildflower has won me over in just one season. All through spring its stems of finely divided leaves were topped with clusters of powder blue flowers. This season, the ground is covered with thriving seedlings, and the display promises to be even better than last year's. Easy to care for, and combines well with other wildflowers.

1. **California Poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*):** The undisputed king of California wildflowers. Its lustrous orange-yellow petals open in the sun and close at night. Native bees go nuts over it. Snails and slugs leave it alone. Reseeds profusely. In a large garden, give it a bed of its own. In my small garden, I place it in the middle of beds, with low growing wildflowers like Goldfields or Meadowfoam in front. Combines well with blue flowered species Globe Gilia or Chia.

When you start growing native wildflowers in your garden, one variety of wildlife you'll attract are the native bees which despite their size are gentle and harmless to humans. I find them infinitely amusing as they rush from flower to flower with a seemingly endless appetite for native nectar.

All good things must come to an end, and so do the wildflowers, which set seed and die by the onset of summer. When this happens, cut back the dry stalks, making sure to collect the seed for next year, or simply letting it drop to the ground. Let the bed lie undisturbed (no mulching, no digging) until late fall, when the rains will bring it back to life. To add interest to a dormant wildflower bed, native gardeners will often imitate nature and intersperse native bunchgrasses among the wildflowers.

Larner Seeds (www.larnerseeds.com) has the best selection of native wildflower seeds. If you have time, make the 2-hour trip to Bolinas to see their demonstration garden and attend a seminar with Judith Lowry. If you prefer, get 4" pots from Annie's Annuals (www.anniesannuals.com) which are available at independent nurseries; these are inexpensive plants with well-formed root systems and a high survival rate; I get mine from Payless Nursery, 2927 S. King Road (at Aborn), San Jose, 408-274-7815. Plants grown by Sally Casey are often available at meetings of the Gardening With Natives group in winter and spring.

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