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## SOW WILDFLOWER SEEDS NOW FOR A SPRING DISPLAY

By Faith Brown, Marin Master Gardener

Have you ever come home after a spring hike on Marin open space with visions of creating a colorful swath of wildflowers in your own backyard? Well, fall is the perfect time to get started. The winter rains will do much of the work for you, and come next spring, you'll be greeted by a cheery display.

Growing annual California wildflowers from seed is easy, gratifying and cost-effective. Annuals complete their life cycle from seed to flowering to reseeding in one year and then die. By self-seeding, a new generation returns each year. Native annuals that do well in the home garden include:

- Baby-blue eyes (*Nemophila menziesii*) -- sky-blue blossoms with white centers, low growing or trailing, looks great in containers.
- California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) -- yellow-orange flowers, reseeds prolifically (have you ever seen poppies springing up from the cracks in a median strip?)
- Farewell-to-spring (*Clarkia amoena*) -- bright pink with crimson blotches, makes a great cut flower, blooms late spring to early summer
- Five spot (*Nemophila maculata*) -- low growing, white flowers with a dark purple spot on the tip of each petal
- Globe gilia (*Gilia capitata*) -- blue pincushion-like flowers
- Tidy tips (*Layia platyglossa*) -- yellow flowers with white tips

Another attractive candidate, although not for its insignificant flowers, is miner's lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*), a perky lime-green low-growing plant that likes part shade and does well under oaks. Its leaves make a delicious addition to salads.

Here are some tips for adding natives to your garden:

**SELECT A SITE:** California annual wildflowers generally need six to eight hours of sun daily, and they like to keep their feet dry. Avoid poorly drained areas that stay soggy after a heavy rain. It's best to start small: while a wildflower meadow might seem like a lovely, low-maintenance solution for your garden, in reality, meadows require hours of persistent weeding for several years until they become established. Try growing a small patch or two, and let the wildflowers seed themselves into adjoining spaces. Wildflowers also look good in raised beds or containers, around a mailbox, or as filler in a new bed before more permanent plantings reach their mature size.

**PREPARE THE SOIL:** Natives do well in average soil, so amendments are not necessary. The most important step is to rid the area of weeds and grass, which can outcompete newly sprouting wildflowers. One technique is to remove existing vegetation, loosen the soil to a depth of one to two inches and water well. After two weeks or so, remove any weeds that have popped up. If the area is extremely weedy, water it again and remove the next crop of weeds before spreading your seeds.

**SOW YOUR SEEDS:** To insure even coverage, it's best to mix the wildflower seeds with horticultural sand or vermiculite. Scatter by hand across the planting area. Tamp down with a board or your feet so the seeds

make good contact with the soil. You can protect the seeds from birds by sprinkling a light cover of straw or fine soil over the area. Give your seeds a good watering. It's important to keep the seed bed moist until the seeds germinate. If winter rains are intermittent, remember to hand water regularly.

**HELP THEM MULTIPLY:** Once your wildflower planting takes off, stay on top of the weeds. After natives finish blooming, they can look droopy or brown. Be patient! Allow them to set seed for a repeat performance next year. You can also collect and save seed to disperse in other areas of your garden next fall. Once the seeds have dropped, you can mow or cut the remaining stems. Continue to pull weeds.

California natives are a worthy addition to your Marin landscape. They attract pollinators and beneficial insects, require little water once established and are relatively disease and pest free. And who can resist the palette of pinks, blues and yellows that brighten up your spring garden?

The Bay Area has a growing number of nurseries that specialize in native species. Fall is the best time for shopping for plants. Check the California Native Plant Society Marin Chapter's website for other resources and information: <http://www.marin.edu/cnps/>