

Wildflower Seed Mixes



When you have taken a stroll through your local garden center or nursery, have you noticed all the different wildflower seed mixes that you can purchase? The seed packets are so pretty depicting a colorful array of flowers that you can plant and enjoy with little or no work. These mixes even come in a can and as a “seed carpet”. You just roll out this carpet, water and poof, instant flowers! I have a real problem with these mixes as I have seen what happens when some of the seeds that are found in these mixes escape to the surrounding area. For example, several of these mixes list bachelor button, *Centaurea cyanus* spp. Guess who is a close cousin to this “wildflower”? Yep, the notorious knapweeds are also in the *Centaurea* family. I have seen bachelor buttons along the roadway and in Palouse agriculture fields. This is a very difficult weed to control and if left uncontrolled in a cropping situation can out compete the desired crop resulting in reduced crop yields.

Another one that is contained in these mixes is the California poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*. I have seen this in Whitman County along a gravel country road. Pretty when in bloom, yes, but year after year I see it spreading further and further along this road. Both of these plants, bachelor button and California poppy, I am pretty sure have escaped from some farm wife’s garden in years past. Can you see where I am going with this? Buyer beware! You might be contributing to the noxious weed problem. The University of Washington did research into wildflower mixes. They grew 19 packets of wildflower seed mixes and found that each contained from 3 to 13 invasive species and eight had seed for plants considered noxious weeds in at least one U.S. state or Canadian province.



Another thing the University of Washington research noted was that a third of the seed packets listed no contents and a little more than another third had inaccurate lists. Only 5 of the 19 correctly itemized everything. I have also noticed this when reading the contents of the wildflower seed packets. Most list the flower seeds by common name instead of botanical name, so do you really know what you are getting when you purchase these packets of seeds?

Some of these packets claim to contain native plant seeds, but how do you know that these seeds are native to your area? You really have to wonder if they are truly native seeds when a seed company that is located in an entirely different region of the country produces the seed packets. Please remember the basic definition of a native plant. A native plant is a plant that was here before the area

was settled and was not introduced to a region by humans, animals or birds. Unless a local company processes the seed, I think it can be assumed that these “native” seed mixes are really “wildflower” seed mixes.

Wildflower seed mixes can be divided into four groups: local, regional, national and specialty. Local seed mixes are produced by local companies or nurseries and are harder to find. For example, seeds from plants that are native to the Inland Empire area. Regional seed mixes include seeds of plants that are native to major habitats of a region. For example, seeds from plants that are native to the Pacific Northwest, but how will these seeds do in the drier versus wetter areas of this region? National mixes contain very hardy species of seed from a large range of habitats across the continent. For example, seeds from plants from both the United States and Canada and from the really wet areas to the desert areas. Specialty seed mixes are similar to national seed mixes except the seeds are combined for a specific purpose. For example, to attract butterflies or to attract birds.



Have I convinced you yet that wildflower seed mixes or meadows in a can might be more of a problem than they are worth? If not, there are some steps that you can take to be a responsible gardener. First, I would consider making up my own wildflower mix after doing some research into what plants I would like in this mixture and what I want to accomplish. For example, do I want to attract butterflies or use the seed mix as a ground cover? I would also do research into what plants will do well in my area and that are not considered noxious or plants of concern (plants that have the potential to become invasive).

Second, I would try to locate a reputable local seed source. A reputable seed company will be less likely to have impurities or contaminants in their seed mixes. Third, if I am going to plant a seed mixture I will check to see what seeds are listed on the packet. If the seeds are not listed on the packet I will contact the seed company for a list of seeds that are in that packet and if there are any contaminants in their products. Keep in mind, this is not being a pushy consumer, but an informed consumer and most seed companies will be glad to answer your questions. Hopefully, by following these steps you will be on the road to success with your new planting and prevent the spread of noxious or potentially threatening species.

RESOURCES:

uwnews.org...Wildflower seed mixes include some wicked bloomers

<http://uwnews.washington.edu/ni/ublic/rint2.asp>

Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board

<http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/education/publication/meadow.html>