



# FLORIDA WILDFLOWERS

## A Planning & Planting Guide

Coast to coast, from the Panhandle to the Keys, there are dozens of Florida native wildflowers available to add color, seasonal interest and life to your landscape. With thoughtful planning and preparation, you can plant and enjoy Florida wildflowers for years to come.

### PHASE 1 / Planning

#### Wildflowers in the Florida Landscape

A field of wildflowers is a scene we all enjoy and is often the inspiration for planting wildflowers. Throughout Florida, fields of flowers naturally occur in pinelands (flat grasslands with scattered trees) and in wet and dry prairies with few to no trees. The fields we see are composed of native bunch grasses, sedges, and wildflowers, and can serve as models for wildflower plantings in our landscapes.

Some wildflowers don't look too great in their off-seasons and some virtually disappear. Mixing them with other wildflowers and bunch grasses keeps up appearances and can help discourage weeds.

A wildflower bed or garden is not the only or best way to incorporate native flowers into your landscape. Planting flowering native trees and shrubs is an easy, long-lasting way to enjoy wildflowers. A

diversity of trees, shrubs, and vines, along with wildflowers and grasses, creates the best habitat for birds,

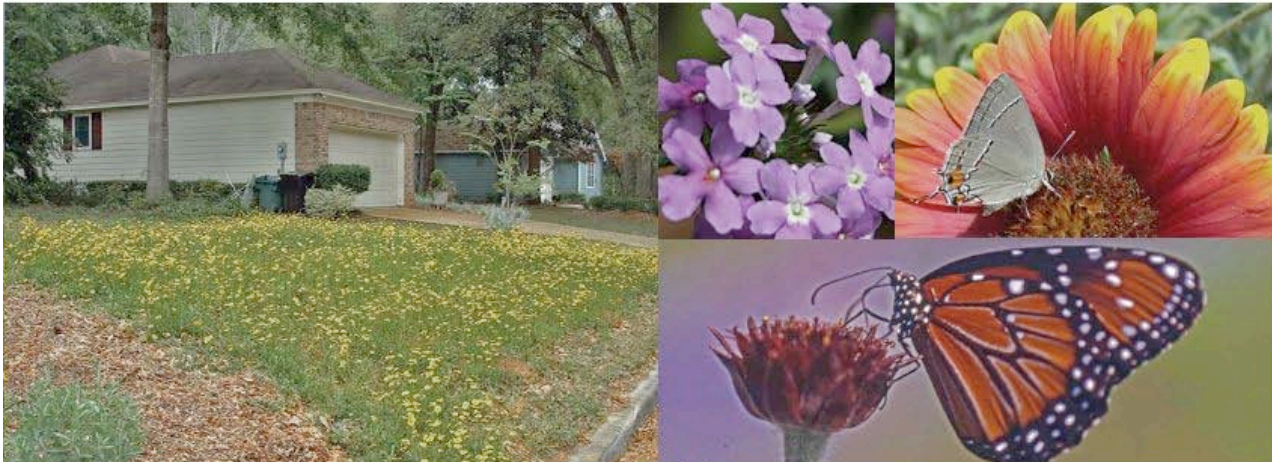
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butterflies and other creatures. You can sprinkle color throughout your landscape by adding seasonal wildflowers to tree and shrub plantings. Relying on trees and shrubs as the key visual anchors in your landscape also relieves you of the pressure to fill voids left during your wildflowers' off-seasons.

Generally, Florida wildflowers tend to behave as annuals, short-lived perennials that last 2-3 years, or perennials that last several seasons. Many annual and short-lived perennial wildflowers become "perennial" in the landscape by reseeding. Many wildflowers are good seed producers. You can learn to collect the seed, and have some control over where new plants occur, or you can allow the plants to surprise you with their own movement through the landscape. The latter approach works if your landscape isn't too formal and you learn to distinguish desired seedlings from weeds.

#### Get to Know Local Wildflowers

Knowing which wildflowers naturally occur in your region will help you make successful selections for your landscape. Check with nearby public conservation parks and the Florida Wildflower Foundation website to find out where and when you can see the best local wildflower shows. Check with your local Florida Native Plant Society chapter (see pg. 19) or county extension office to find out where you can see planted native landscapes. Also visit your local native nursery at different times of the year to see available native plants. Try to observe plants before, during, and after peak bloom times so you can learn how to save seeds, how to recognize seedlings, and know when to perform maintenance.



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### Understanding Florida Wildflower Seasons

You can take advantage of natural cycles, such as seasonal rainfall, in planning your landscape. And knowing when wildflowers bloom in your region will help you plan a landscape that works year-round. Throughout Florida, the most diverse, showy and longest wildflower displays tend to occur in the fall, from September through mid-November, after the wildfires and heavy rains of summer. Winter and spring tend to be dry seasons in Florida, with most rainfall occurring in late spring through early fall. In North Florida, spring offers the showiest displays, especially if there's been adequate rainfall and a mild winter. Summer tends to be an intensive growing season for both wildflowers and weeds. In spring and summer, wildflower species may only flower for 3-4 continuous weeks and new growth in grasses may not be apparent until late summer. Some species that occur statewide tend to bloom earlier in South Florida and progressively later in the year as you move north. Select plants grown in and for your region of Florida (see *Why Local Matters* on pg. 17).

### Selecting an Area to Plant

**WEEDS:** Weeds are the main downfall of most wildflower gardens. Select a site with limited or no weeds, and away from weedy areas. If the area is covered in turf, you can plan to kill the turf and plant into the decomposing matter. Avoid areas with anything more than very sparse nutgrass, torpedograss, and unwanted brambles; eradicating these weeds can be cost prohibitive. Plan to kill weeds and weed seeds in advance. Avoid tilling or otherwise disturbing soil, which can cause buried weed seeds to germinate. **NOTE:** If you have large areas of turf to replace, or you want to convert pasture to meadow plantings, obtain the assistance of your local native nursery and/or AFNN landscape specialist (see pg. 23). **SOILS:** Most Florida native wildflowers thrive in well-drained soils.

Avoid heavily compacted soils. Save your compost, heavy mulch, and fertilizer for the kitchen garden. It can be helpful to know the pH of your soil when selecting plants. While wildflowers generally perform well at a pH of 5.5-6.5, some species prefer the lower end of that range and others do best at the higher end. Take special care if planting near new construction or paving, where fill or building materials might affect soils. Cement, cement bags and even pieces of concrete can increase soil pH and cause poor growth and survival of wildflowers. Your county extension office can advise you, provide a soil testing kit and assist in interpreting test results. Your native nursery probably will be familiar with conditions in your neighborhood or development, and can help you select plants best suited for your soils.

**SUNLIGHT:** Plenty of sun is needed for good flowering of most wildflowers, with at least 6 hours of full sun from morning to early afternoon being ideal. Many plants tolerate what is called "high shade" (the light shifting shade of tall pine trees) during the day, or partial or full shade in the late afternoon. Check the intended area a few times during the day—early morning, mid morning, noon, and mid-afternoon—to determine how much sunlight is available and when.

**SIZE:** If this is your first wildflower garden, consider starting small so you can master a few species, conquer weeds, and get a feel for maintaining an evolving garden. A minimum size plot might be an area 6-feet wide and deep, allowing for 2-3 plants of 3-5 different flowering species and some bunch grasses.

**MOISTURE:** If you have low areas in your landscape that catch or hold rainwater, such as drainage swales, take advantage of them by planting wildflowers that thrive on periodic inundation. After a good rain shower, observe how quickly your soils drain and note any standing water areas.

**SKETCH:** Make a sketch of your landscape, identifying directions (N, S, E, W) and major elements such as your house, driveway, sidewalks, utility easements, trees, hedges, and any areas to remain unplanted. Use the sketch to identify planned wildflower area(s) and take notes regarding the size of the area, sunlight, soils, and drainage. Take your sketch with you when buying plants.

1 Field of October daisy (*Coreopsis floridana*) in Central Florida restoration project. 2 Field of coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) replaces turf at this Tallahassee home. 3 Closeup of verbena (*Glandularia tampensis*). 4 Hairstreak butterfly on blanket flower (*Gaillardia pulchella*). 5 Queen butterfly on rayless sunflower (*Helianthus radula*). / PHOTOS: 1 The Natives, 2 Jeff Norcini, 3 Greg Krokczyk, 4 Peg Urban, 5 Maple Street Natives

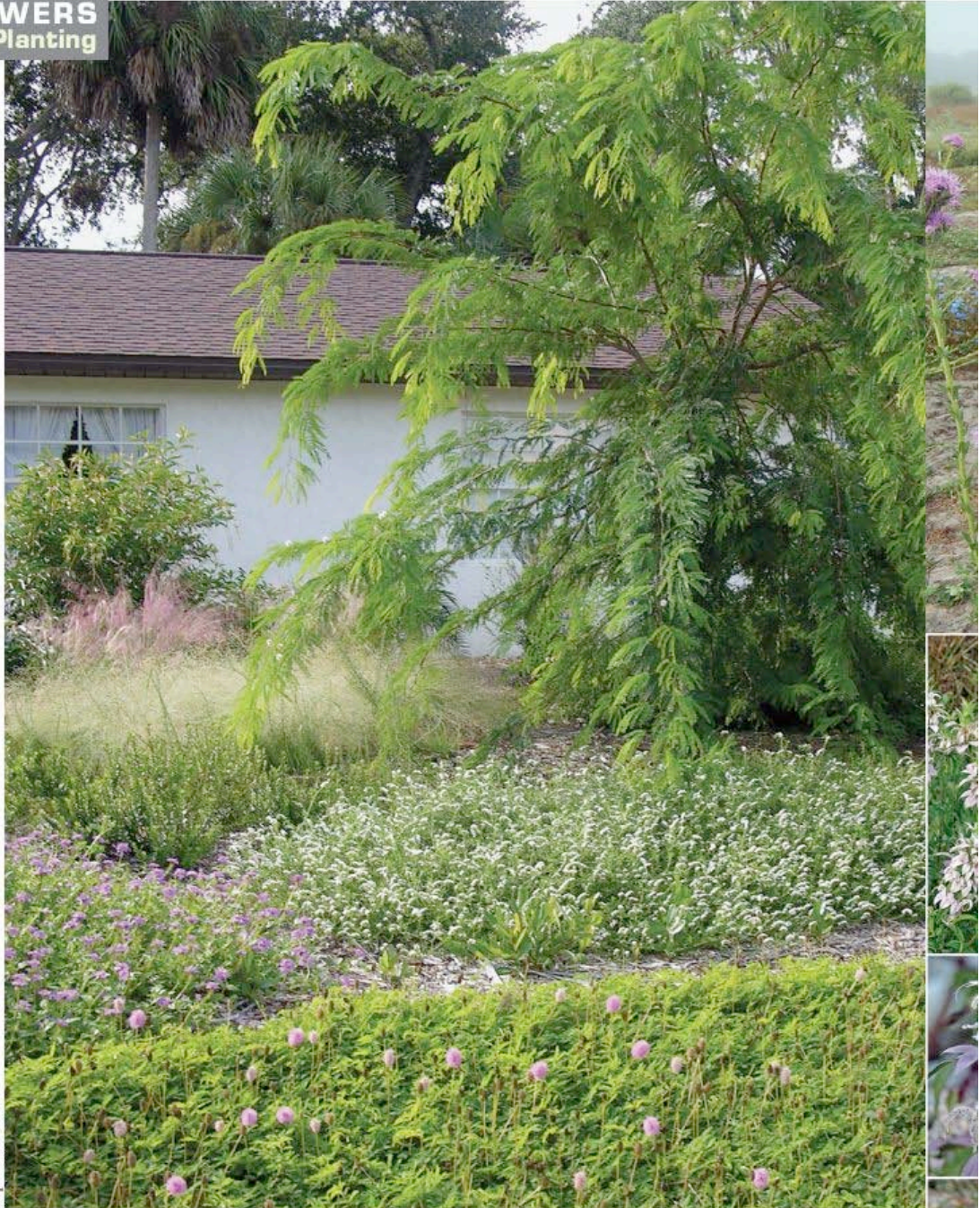
## PHASE 2 →

# WILDFLOWERS Planning & Planting

Phase 2  
Plant Selection

**THIS CENTRAL FLORIDA YARD** replaced turf with beds of flowering native plants and bunchgrasses, including sunshine mimosa (*Mimosa strigillosa*), scorpiontail (*Heliotropium angiospermum*), verbena (*Glandularia tampensis*), lovegrass (*Eragrostis elliottii*), and muhlygrass (*Muhlenbergia*) around a wild tamarind tree (*Lysiloma latisiliquum*).

Maple Street Nurseries



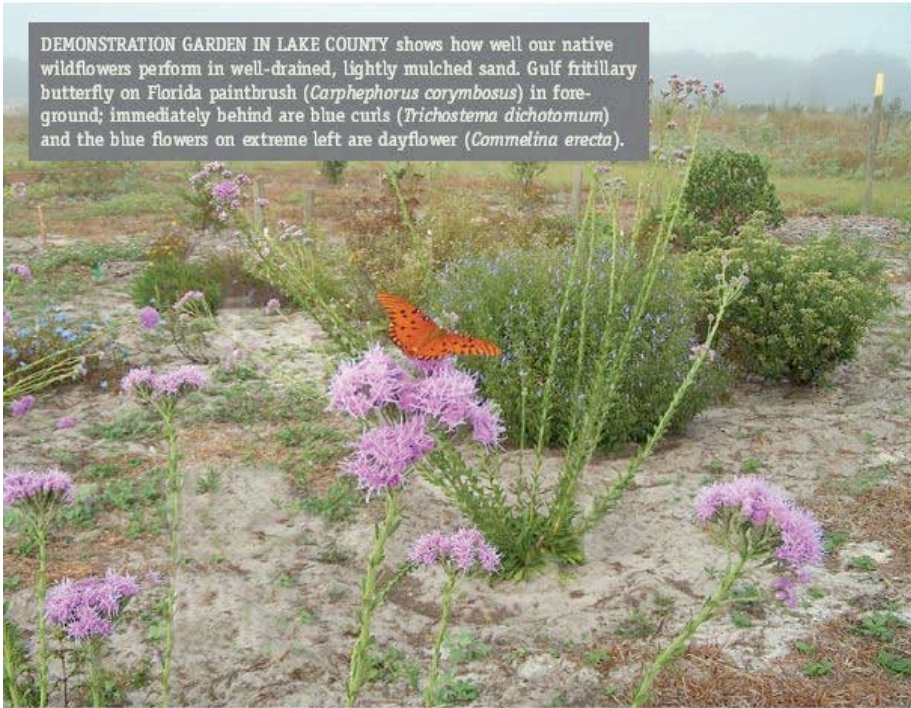
## PHASE 2 Plant Selection

Always select plants available from local native nurseries or from reputable seed sources that supply local ecotype seed (see pg. 17). Never remove plants from wild areas or local parks. The plants best adapted to growing in our landscapes are the ones that are readily available in native nurseries. There are some wildflowers that are difficult to grow or maintain in planted landscapes. As you gain knowledge and experience, you can experiment with rare, uncommon or more difficult species, with assistance from your local native nursery.



Peg Urban

DEMONSTRATION GARDEN IN LAKE COUNTY shows how well our native wildflowers perform in well-drained, lightly mulched sand. Gulf fritillary butterfly on Florida paintbrush (*Carphephorus corymbosus*) in foreground; immediately behind are blue curls (*Trichostema dichotomum*) and the blue flowers on extreme left are dayflower (*Commelina erecta*).



The Natives

**BRIGHT YELLOW FLOWERS** are abundant on silkgrass (*Pityopsis graminifolia* var. *tracyi*), here mixed with purple lovegrass (*Eragrostis elliottii*) and bluestem grass (*Andropogon* species).

Peg Urban



Select plants that provide variety in appearance and blooming period. To add visual interest, select plants that have different heights and leaf sizes, shapes and surfaces (e.g., shiny or dull). Mix them so that boldly shaped or colored plants are visible in the front of the garden and taller plants can be seen at the back (and can be staked, if needed). Fill out the garden by mixing finely textured bunch grasses in with both coarsely textured and thin, fragile-looking wildflowers. It is possible to select a variety of plants that provide new blooms every month or two from spring through fall, as well as long-season bloomers. Plants that occur in the same ecosystem will be good companion plants in your garden.

**DOWNLOAD A LIST** of our recommended best-performing wildflowers from [www.afnn.org](http://www.afnn.org)

**DOWNLOAD**

- 1 Gulf fritillary butterflies nectar on beebalm, also known as dotted horsemint (*Monarda punctata*), here mixed with wild poinsettia (*Poinsettia cyathophora*) and coreopsis (*Coreopsis leavenworthii*).
- 2 Lance-leaved coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*).
- 3 Beach or dune sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*).
- 4 Dotted horsemint or spotted beebalm (*Monarda punctata*) with small cassius blue butterfly (see detail on facing page).
- 5 Bulletproof plant: Blanket flower or Indianblanket (*Gaillardia pulchella*) thrives in full sun and dry, sandy soils.
- 6 Rough blazing star (*Liatris spicata*).
- 7 Butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*).
- 8 Twinflower (*Dyschoriste oblongifolia*).

PHOTOS: 1, 4, 7 Peg Urban, 2, 3, 6 Wildflowers of Florida, 5 Greg Krolczyk, 8 Fran Palmeri.

**PHASE 3**



## WILDFLOWERS Planning & Planting

Phase 3: Site Preparation

Phase 4: Planting

Phase 5: Maintenance

### PHASE 3

## Site Preparation

The threat of weeds cannot be overstated. It is essential to have a clean planting area with few to no weeds. If you have bare ground, keep it free of weeds.

### Converting Turf Areas

With rare exception, turf needs to be dead before wildflowers are planted. And for areas to be seeded, the soil must be bare. There are three basic ways to kill turf and weeds: 1) using chemical herbicide, 2) light deprivation, and 3) soil solarization.

**HERBICIDES** work relatively quickly but can kill desirable plants if there is spillage or wind. And the jury is still out on the long-term effects of these poisons to the natural environment and human health. If you feel you must use an herbicide, consider using a licensed professional to apply it. If herbicides are used, make sure the only active ingredient is glyphosate or glufosinate (NOTE: Some glyphosate or glufosinate products might contain a relatively small amount of diquat, which is acceptable). Have the area treated at least one month prior to planting and again two weeks later.

**LIGHT DEPRIVATION** takes more time but has the advantage of being perfectly safe and less expensive. To block sunlight from reaching the turf, use heavy material such as old carpet or newspapers under a heavy mulch layer (to weigh the paper down). If you use black plastic sheeting, use a heavy grade that won't disintegrate quickly in the sun. Keep the area thoroughly covered from light for 6 weeks and then check the turf condition. Dead grass is brown and crumbly. Yellow or pale white grass is alive and ready to recover with the first shot of sunlight and water. Go for the brown, even if it takes months. This method will kill above-ground growth of turf and weeds, but the underground parts of turf and weeds may not die.

**SOIL SOLARIZATION** is more effective than light deprivation and requires just a little more work. Solarization uses heat generated by the sun to "cook" and kill your turf/weeds. You can take two approaches—solarization "lite" or full solarization. Solarization lite yields the same result as light deprivation, plus you'll probably kill many weed seeds in the top 1/4-1/2" of soil. You can also use the lite method in bare areas or after turf has been scalped and killed. **SOLARIZATION LITE**

1. Thoroughly saturate the area with water.
2. Immediately cover with greenhouse-quality clear plastic sheeting.
3. Apply weights to hold sheeting close to the ground so that heat can build up underneath.
4. Leave the sheeting in place for several weeks (6 weeks in summer; 8-10 in winter).

**FULL SOLARIZATION** requires more effort, but reaps more benefits—turf and weeds are killed, as are most weed seeds. Full solarization is effective only during very late spring through summer. For this method, first till the soil about 18 inches deep before watering. Then keep covered 6-8 weeks.

Regardless of which method you use, it is essential that there be bare soil in areas where you plant wildflower seed. If the area has dead turf, mow the site with mower blades set to the lowest possible setting. Be sure clippings are discharged away from the area. Rake away any remaining clippings or thatch. (NOTE: In some situations,

it may be desirable to remove thick, lush turf with a sod cutter. Do not till or otherwise disturb the soil.)

You can plant through dead turf if it's not too thick and there is bare soil. If you have very thick turf, reduce it to a thin cover by scalping it.

Plan to plant as soon as possible after the site has been prepared.

## PHASE 4 / Planting

Container-grown wildflowers can be planted whenever available from your local native nursery. The growing season for most species is March-November. For the best show during blooming season, you'll want to plant container-grown wildflowers before they bloom. Follow planting procedures, including watering schedule, provided by your local native nursery. Buying plants may cost more upfront than planting seed, but may be easier, depending on the time you have available to monitor your garden.

Seed for wildflowers and bunch grasses are available. Confirm the quantity of seed you need, best time to plant and procedures with your seed supplier. Planting times for seed can range from late summer to early winter, depending on where you are in the state and other conditions, such as the availability of water. Ideally, the soil will be moist and warm (not too hot, and not cold). Many seeds will germinate in late summer or fall. Planting during the end of rainy season (August-September) can help with germination.





- 1 Water dropwort (*Oxypolis filiformis*).
- 2 Mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*).
- 3 Softhair coneflower (*Rudbeckia mollis*).
- 4 Scorpiontail (*Heliotropium angiospermum*).
- 5 White beardtongue (*Penstemon multiflorus*) mixes beautifully with tropical red sage (*Salvia coccinea*).
- 6 Yellowtop (*Flaveria linearis*).

PHOTOS: 1 The Natives, 2 Claudia Larsen, 3 Wildflowers of Florida, 4 Roger Hammer, 5 Peg Urban, 6 Roger Hammer.



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Planting too late may result in poor germination or germination the following spring, which can delay the blooming of spring- and summer-flowering wildflowers. **DOWNLOAD** seed planting procedures from [www.afnn.org](http://www.afnn.org)

**DOWNLOAD**

**3-MINUTE VIDEO:**

Florida Wildflower Foundation's *Landscaping with Florida Wildflowers* on YouTube.com: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2RckhxWfUM>

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## PHASE 5 / Maintenance

The best maintenance plan is good selection and preparation of the site.

**WEEDS:** Plan to spend time hand-weeding in your garden, particularly the first year. Weeds will appear, because seeds are blown in by the wind or dropped by birds. Monitor your garden weekly and immediately pull any weeds. When you do spend time outdoors weeding, consider it outdoor therapy and a chance to observe your wildflowers and the creatures that visit them.

**MULCH:** It may be tempting to apply a heavy layer of mulch to discourage weeds, but if you want your plants to seed and thus continue, don't over-mulch. The best and most natural looking mulch for wildflower gardens is a light application of pine straw or native leaf litter. Do not use grass clippings. Bare sandy areas are needed for reseeding. If most of your plants are perennials and you plant to collect and plant the seed, you may be able to use more mulch.

**MOISTURE:** Established plants (those that add new growth) should survive on available rainfall except in times of severe drought—if you've selected plants that are suited to your region, soils and available sunlight. Many parts of Florida have been and will continue to experience extended drought, so having some water available is helpful. Rain barrels are a great addition to your landscape.

**FERTILIZER:** It is not necessary to use fertilizer, but you may decide you want to give your plants an extra boost during the bloom season. Wait until your second growing season before fertilizing; then use an organic or controlled-release fertilizer with a low nitrogen to high potassium ratio, with little or no phosphorus. Excess fertilization can promote vegetation growth over flowering and lead to weaker plants that are more susceptible to pests and diseases. Fertilizer will also strengthen weeds.

**DEADHEADING:** Let the plants set seed. There is no need to remove flower heads unless you are collecting seed to plant or do not want plants to reseed themselves. If you're collecting seed, wait at least a month or more after peak blooming before doing so. Ask your native nursery how to recognize when seeds are ready on each plant. Where possible, leave seed heads on plants to feed birds.

**TRIMMING AND MOWING:** Trimming is specific to species and the best mowing schedule may depend on what region you're in. Ask your native nursery about species-specific maintenance, such as cutting back bunch grasses. Learn to appreciate the post-blooming look of your plants. Those brown stems and dried leaves provide seasonal interest, help you remember where things are planted during their dormant season, and are essential habitat for many insects and larvae that feed birds. Generally, wildflower plots can be mowed or trimmed to remove old growth once or twice a year after major bloom periods, for example, in late summer and again after November. ■