If you want to paint your garden with the springtime colors of wildflowers, now is the time to get your garden paintbrush. The first step to enjoy the colorful blooms of wildflowers in spring is to plant the seeds this fall. Although wildflowers are typically hardy, they need to be planted right. Here in Central Texas, the time to plant those seeds is the period from late September to mid December.

During a Wildflower Kickoff seminar this September, John Thomas of Wildseed Farms in Fredericksburg outlined steps that will help gardeners become successful at growing wildflowers. First, he explained that wildflowers, such as bluebonnets, Indian paintbrush, horse-mint and others, are annuals – plants that complete their lifecycle in one growing season. However, if they remain standing long enough after blooming, they will reseed, leaving a start for the next year. Thomas pointed out that not all wildflowers are suited for Texas, and he suggested that gardeners should pick a mixture of seeds suitable for our climate. If a mix is not available, gardeners can make one of their own by mixing seeds from packets of various types.

Gardeners should select a site that receives four to six hours of sun a day. Once they are established, wildflowers do not like “wet feet,” so the site should have porous soil and good drainage. A site on a sunny slope is their preferred location. If they are going to be planted in a grassy area, they prefer to grow in areas with grasses that are dormant in winter, such as Bermuda. Once their future “home” is chosen, the gardener needs to make sure that soil is visible in the planting area. Soil contact is essential for seeds to germinate, and thick vegetation can keep seeds from reaching the soil. Because morning dew might also restrict soil contact, the gardener should wait until afternoon to plant in grassy areas.

In order to germinate, wildflower seeds need to be kept consistently moist, so the gardener needs to decide if the seeds will depend on Mother Nature for rain or be watered by hand and hose. If the decision is to depend on rainfall, plant the seeds during a cloudy period before a soaking rainfall that is followed by more rain and cloudy days. Thomas recommended the “Feed-the-Chickens” method of sowing, putting seeds in two buckets, mixing them with a little coarse, clean sand, then tossing them in rows of the planting area, going east to west with the seeds from one bucket, alternately from right to left until the first bucket is empty. Then take the second bucket and go north to south, covering the same area. Walking lightly over the seeds helps to insure soil contact. If the gardener is depending on rain, the job is done and hopefully Mother Nature will take over. If the hose is going to supply the needed water, the seeds should be watered gently but thoroughly for ten days to two weeks if there is no rain.

A good trick that Thomas suggested is that the gardener plant a pinch of the wildflower seed in a pot with potting soil, place it in a sunny, nearby, visible spot, and water it at the same time the wildflower planting area is watered. When the baby plants in the pot begin to emerge, they and the plants in the planting area no longer need daily watering. Planting the pot also serves another purpose – the gardener will know what the baby plants look like when they emerge and they will not be mistaken for unwanted weeds. Baby bluebonnets are so hardy that the planting area can be mowed if the blade height on the mower is adjusted. The gardener can check the height of the baby wildflowers in the pot. Even cold weather may not damage baby bluebonnets. They can usually handle a hard freeze if it occurs ten days after they have emerged, as long as the freezing temperatures do not last for several days.

Now, the gardener just needs to wait until spring – when it’s time to plant sunflowers!

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com