



## Yes, You Can Grow Perennials from Seed

*Problem:* Your vision is vast, but your budget is tiny.

*Solution:* Create the large swaths of flowering perennials that inhabit your garden dreams without spending a fortune by choosing varieties that grow easily from seed.



Above photographs from the National Garden Bureau.

Herbaceous perennial plants—those that live from year to year, regenerating from the roots each spring—are often propagated by dividing big clumps of roots into sections. The sections can be potted and sold or, in the case of the home gardener, planted elsewhere or given away to friends. So why do gardeners opt to grow perennial flowering plants from seed, rather than purchase them as a potted plant?

**1. They Want to Save Money.** For the cost of a pack of seeds you might end up with dozens of plants. This is a powerful incentive for an ambitious gardener on a tight budget. Many of the perennials in your nursery's inventory have, in fact, been grown from seed.

**2. They Want to Start a Meadow.** Wildflowers that inhabit meadows are tough and tenacious, and are among the easiest perennial plants to



Cost to establish a meadow using transplants: \$1 per square ft, minimum. Cost to establish a meadow using seed: 7 to 12 cents per square ft. (1) Image courtesy of Iowa University Extension and Outreach.



start from seed. Black-eyed Susans, coneflowers, asters, lobelias, milkweeds, and native grasses will create a colorful scene that will lure many species of birds, butterflies, and bees to your plot.

**3. They like Surprises.** Vegetatively propagated cultivars (those that have been divided or started from cuttings) are perfectly uniform. This can be desirable—if you don't like surprises. For those who welcome the unexpected, seedlings can provide a little fun. After all, many new perennial cultivars are discovered when a seedling produces flowers of surprising hues, or with unusual growth habits.

**4. It's Not Difficult.** Although it's true that some perennials (orchids, for example) can be tricky to grow from seed, others are almost foolproof. Some even flower the first year from seed.

#### Ten to Try

- **Anise hyssop** (*Agastache*): Seeds can germinate in less than a week, but can also take as long as a month. Plants grow 3 to 4 feet tall and sport spikes of lavender flowers that are irresistible to bees and butterflies. Zones 4 to 9.
- **Black-eyed Susan** (*Rudbeckia*): Seeds germinate in about 3 weeks. Plants are tolerant of heavy soils, and the cheerful flowers bloom throughout the summer. Zones 4 to 9.
- **Blanket Flower** (*Gaillardia*): Seeds can take up to three weeks to sprout. Keep them warm (70-75°F) until germination occurs. Compact plants usually bloom the first year from seed, and the warm-hued flowers attract butterflies. Zones 3 to 10.
- **Columbine** (*Aquilegia*): Make sure the seed is fresh. Sown in winter, native columbines (*A. caerulea* and *A. canadensis*) germinate reliably in spring and bloom the same year. Zones 3 to 8.
- **Coneflower** (*Echinacea*): Sow seed in a warm location (about 70°F) and germination should occur within 3 weeks. Seed can also be sown outdoors in the summer months. Plants will take a year or more to reach blooming size. Zones 3 to 9.
- **Feverfew** (*Tanacetum*): Make sure the seed is fresh. Feverfew seeds require light to germinate; sown on the surface of a potting mix and kept moist, they sprout in two weeks or less. Or sow directly outdoors. Zones 5 to 9.
- **Salvia** (*Salvia nemorosa*): Of the many different species of salvia, *S. nemorosa* is one of the easiest to grow from seed. It germinates in 1 to 2 weeks and can reach booming size the first year. The blue to purple flowers are attractive to bees and butterflies. Zones 4 to 9.
- **Shasta daisy** (*Leucanthemum*): Easy from seed, treat this the same as any annual flower. Plants grow to 4 feet tall and are beautiful in a mass planting. Zones 4 to 8.
- **Thrift** (*Armeria*): One of the easiest perennials to grow from seed, thrift germinates in about 2 weeks and fills in quickly, flowering in as little as 12 weeks. The grassy plants stand only inches tall, with pink bloom stems of 6 to 8 inches. Zones 4 to 8.
- **Tickseed** (*Coreopsis*): Germination should occur in two weeks or less. Plants usually can be counted on to produce their characteristically profuse blooms the first year, if sown in spring. Zones 4 to 9.



## What You Should Know

**Patience Pays Off:** Perennials are typically slower to germinate than annual flowers. Zinnias and marigolds pop up in a matter of days, while some perennials may take up to a month to sprout.

**Timing is Not as Critical:** Because you're growing plants that will live more than one year, starting them in early spring is not as essential with perennials. As long as your plants get a sturdy enough start to make it through the winter, they will bloom—if not the first year, then the second.

**Soil Mix Should be Well Draining:** Panayoti Kelaidis, curator at Denver Botanic Gardens, recommends adding clean, washed sand to soilless potting mix at a ratio of 1 part sand to 2 parts soil mix, to improve drainage.

**Most Seeds Require Light:** Sow several seeds in a single pot, scattering them evenly on the surface. Cover them lightly, if at all.

**Maintain Optimal Conditions for Germination:** Because germination will take some time, it is essential that the soil mix remain moist for a period of days to weeks. Try topping the soil mix with a layer of sterile aquarium gravel and sowing tiny seeds right on top (they will fall into crevices) to help keep the seeds evenly moist. Larger seeds can be sown directly on the soil mix and top-dressed with a light layer of gravel. Some growers sow seeds in pots and place them in clear, loosely tied plastic bags. Others mist frequently. Others simply mimic nature as closely as possible, placing the pots outdoors and letting the natural freeze-thaw cycles take care of the rest.

**Water Gently:** Water seeds that have not yet germinated and newly emerged seedlings with a very gentle spray or mist. Or set pots into a basin and allow them to absorb water from below.

**“Prick Out” Seedlings and Give Them Space:** Very carefully, pull tender seedlings apart and place each in its own pot after seedlings develops their first true leaves. Protect them from direct sun until they size up. This can take 2 weeks, or 2 months, depending on the species.

(1) Neil Diboll, 2003. The Right and Wrong Grasses. Grounds Maintenance Magazine.