



Horticulture Diagnostic Laboratory

Extension Education Center
423 Griffing Ave, Ste 100
Riverhead, NY 11901-3071
631-727-4126
www.ccesuffolk.org

Bayard Cutting Arboretum
Montauk Hwy
Great River, NY 11739
631-727-4126

**Cornell
Cooperative
Extension**
Suffolk County

Ten Winsome Wildflowers for Your Garden

The delicacy and exotic nature of woodland wildflowers can make them seem more formidable to grow than they are. As with any plant, simulating the wildflowers' native habitat is the key to success.

Shade or filtered sunlight provided by deciduous trees or spare stands of evergreens is necessary to prevent scorching of the plants, points out William J. Hamilton, Jr., who has been a gardener for 70 of his 82 years and a consultant to the Cornell Plantations for 30 years. Hamilton, an emeritus professor of zoology at Cornell University, has more than 100 native Northeastern wildflower varieties in his 3-1/2-acre Ithaca garden.

He suggests that ferns, especially Christmas, maidenhair, and wood ferns, be planted among the wildflowers to maintain soil coolness and to provide shade for the smaller plants.

The best companion trees for a wildflower garden are hemlocks, spruces, pines, firs, beeches, oaks, and birches. Their needles and leaves decompose into acid humus, an essential ingredient for many wildflowers. A cheap and rewarding way to increase the number of shade trees is to start them from seed. Acorns, for example, can be collected along roadsides or sidewalks right after they have fallen to the ground and then planted a few inches apart and an inch deep. In a few years' time, the seedlings will valiantly furnish traces of shade and a little protection from the wind.

In preparing the soil bed, a 50-50 mixture of soil and damp peat moss should be dug into the ground at a depth of 12 to 18 inches. The final mixture, says Hamilton, should be friable, "falling apart in the hands like a fresh chocolate cake -- spongy yet crumbly."

"Sprinkle a 1/8-inch layer of superphosphate, ammonium sulphate, or powdered sulfur over the soil and rake in; these chemicals increase the soil acidity. Adding finely shredded rotted wood chips, rotted leaves or sawdust, or decomposed grass clippings each year will enrich the soil, he notes.

To gauge a soil's pH (acidity or alkalinity) before starting a garden and to monitor the pH thereafter, have the soil tested. Visit the [Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County](http://www.ccesuffolk.org) web site or contact our office for information on how to have your soil tested.

Wildflower seeds and plants can be obtained from mail-order companies, some local nurseries, and occasionally, botanical societies. Although botanical societies usually restrict seed sales and exchanges to members, a few will sell to nonmembers.

For names of sources, refer to publications on wildflowers (see as examples suggested books at end of article) or contact local garden clubs or your county Cornell Cooperative Extension office.

Fall is the ideal time for transplanting. The cooler weather minimizes the risk of dehydration and yet permits the plants to establish a strong root system before frost ends the growing season. Fall is also a good time to plant seeds, and some wildflower varieties; for example, certain ladyslipper orchids do best when seeded then.

Wildflowers on publicly or privately owned land (other than one's own) should never be picked nor their plants collected, Hamilton emphasizes. Many are protected by law, and increasing numbers are becoming endangered as their habitats are lost to commercial and residential development. In New York State, several dozen varieties are protected; including all native ferns and orchids, and picking or transplanting them is a punishable violation.

Some varieties are extremely slow to flower from seed – the trout lily (*Erythronium americanum*), for example, doesn't bloom until its seventh year - and can discourage all but the most committed gardener. For those who don't mind the modest to not-so-modest wait, seeds are an economical route to variety and quantity for a showy display.

There is a large selection of native wildflowers that will thrive under shadier-than-average conditions in the home garden, but Hamilton offers this list of 10 that he regards as ideal beginner's varieties:

- Large White Trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*). Waxy, pure white, whorled three-petaled flowers. Bloom period May-June. Petals echoed in the graceful, whorled, trio of low-growing leaves. Neutral to moderately acid soil (pH 5-7); moist or semi-dry. Partial shade or filtered sunlight. Does well on slopes; also can be cultivated on flat land. Prefers canopy of deciduous trees; does less well under evergreens. Takes 4-5 years to bloom from seed. Multiplies readily.
- Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*). Foam-like spikes of miniature white flowers on stalks up to 9 inches high. Blooms April-June. Plants 6-12 inches. Neutral to moderately acid soil (pH 5-7); moist. Shade. Does less well under evergreens. Light oakleaf groundcover desirable.
- Jack-in-the-Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*). Stately brown and green-hooded flowers at base of 15- to 20-inch plant. Blooms April-June. Bears scarlet berries in August. Moderately acid soil; moist. Partial shade.
- Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica*). Delicate, starlike white or pink petals with rose-colored veins on 4- to 6-inch fragile stalks. Blooms April-May. Plants trail on forest floor. Neutral to slightly acid soil; moist. Filtered sunlight.
- Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*). Flowers hidden by leaves, maroon with a flush of soft gray green; resemble tiny stone jugs. Plants 4-6 inches. Makes good groundcover because of attractive, long-lasting foliage. Neutral to slightly acid soil; moist. Shade.
- White Baneberry (*Actaea pachypoda*). White flowers in tight oblong clusters. Blooms April-early June. Plants 1-2 feet. Waxy white fruits with black eye, borne on red stalks. Neutral to moderately acid soil; moist. Shade or filtered sunlight.
- Black Cohosh; Bugbane; Fairy Candles (*Cimicifuga racemosa*). Tall candles of tiny white feathery flowers. Blooms June-Sept. Bold, showy plant 3-8 feet high. Neutral to moderately acid soil; moist to somewhat dry. Partial shade or full sun.
- Rue Anemone (*Anemonella thalictroides*). Fragile flowers in shades of pink and white. Blooms March-May. Plants 4-6 inches. Lacy whorl of small, three-lobed leaves. Neutral to slightly acid soil; moist. Filtered sunlight.
- Virginia Bluebells; Virginia Cowslips (*Mertensia virginica*). Nodding clusters of pink buds turn into porcelain blue flowers. Blooms March-May. Plants 1-2 feet. Leaves oval, strongly veined. Nearly neutral soil (pH 6-7); moist. Partial shade.
- Herb-Robert (*Geranium robertianum*). Tiny trumpet-shaped, rose-colored flowers, occasionally white. Blooms all summer. Plants 6-18 inches. Strongly scented, fernlike foliage that turns bronze in fall and is retained throughout winter. Neutral or slightly acid soil; moist or dry. Full or partial shade.

Suggested reading:

1. Sperka, Marie. *Growing Wildflowers: A Gardener's Guide*. Harper and Row, New York (1973). Reprinted 1984 (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York).
2. Birdseye, Clarence and Eleanor G. *Growing Woodland Plants*. Oxford University Press, New York (1957)
3. Borland, Hal. *A Countryman's Flowers*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York (1981).
4. Peterson, Roger Tory and Margaret McKenny. *A Field Guide to Wildflowers of Northeastern and North Central America*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston (1968).
5. Niering, William A. and Nancy C. Olmstead. *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Wildflowers*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York (1979).

The author used William J. Hamilton, Jr., Emeritus Professor of Zoology, College of Arts and Sciences, Cornell as a resource for this article.

Resource: Hendersen Zorika, P. "Ten Winsome Wildflowers for Your Garden." *Long Island Gardening* October 1988.

TK 11/2008 AW 2/2012 AR 11/2025