

“Bee” Careful with Wildflower Seed Mixes!

Many gardeners want to help bees and butterflies by growing wildflowers, and one of the easiest and most popular ways to do this is to buy a packet of wildflower seeds and throw them into the garden beds at home or at the cottage. But beware: not all “wildflower” seeds are as advertised, and many include seeds that are not native to this region or even to this continent.

You might think that’s OK because at least these flowers will produce the nectar that all bees and butterflies feed on. And while that may be true, the quality of the nectar may not be up to snuff. ONLY plants that evolved in our region contain the highly nutritious nectar that our native bees and butterflies need. This is especially important in the fall when non-resident butterflies are beginning to migrate and need to fatten up for the journey, and when native bees are building their solitary nests.

This is the wording on a package sold as a “Bee Feed Mix Wildflowers” from a well-known Canadian seed company:

“This mix is composed of 20 annuals and perennials that will bloom all season long. It has been field-tested and is known to attract honeybees, bumble bees, and other native bees such as mining bees, leaf cutter bees, sweet bees [they mean “sweat” bees] and long-horned bees. Bees will forage on the nectar and pollen, which provide needed carbohydrates and protein. Well-nourished bees are more capable of fending off diseases and parasites.

The mix includes Lavender Hyssop, Rockcress, New England Aster, Beeplant, Lance-Leaved Coreopsis, Plains Coreopsis, Dwarf Cosmos, Chinese Forget-Me-Not, Purple Coneflower, Aspen Daisy, California Poppy, Annual Gaillardia, Globe Gilia, Tidy Tips, Sweet Alyssum, Bergamot, Baby Blue Eyes, Corn Poppy and Ohio Spiderwort.”

This sounds like it would be very pretty, doesn’t it? But let’s look at this list in more detail, using the [Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center’s](#) plant database as a reference source. This database is one of the best for detailed information on wildflowers in North America.

- **Lavender Hyssop:** This is a great plant, native to our region, also known as Anise Hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*).
- **Rockcress:** There are 164 plants listed in the wildflower database and without the botanical name, it’s impossible to know which one this is. There are several possibilities that are native to Ontario. This is the problem with common names. It’s always best to have the botanical name to be sure.

- **New England Aster:** Fantastic fall bloomer, beloved by bees and butterflies, and native to our region.
- **Beeplant:** This is likely a species of Cleome, which is not native to Ontario. But we can't be sure!
- **Lance-Leaved Coreopsis:** This is a great wildflower native to Ontario.
- **Plains Coreopsis:** This is native to the plains of the central USA. It has become naturalized across Canada from BC to Quebec.
- **Dwarf Cosmos:** Native to Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. Invasive in many parts of the world and naturalized across North America.
- **Chinese Forget-Me-Not:** The name says it all!
- **Purple Coneflower:** Native to our region, great garden staple, and the seedheads feed the birds all winter.
- **Aspen Daisy:** There are 246 plants listed with the name "daisy" in them, none of which is called "Aspen Daisy". However, this is likely Aspen Fleabane, which is native to Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming.
- **California Poppy:** Again, the name says it all: this one is native to California, Nevada, New Mexico, and Western Texas.
- **Annual Gaillardia:** There is only one Gaillardia native to Ontario (common name Indian Blanket or Firewheel, botanical name Gaillardia pulchella). This might be it, but then again, it might not. There are 22 other Gaillardias to choose from.
- **Globe Gilia:** Native to the coastal ranges of California north to BC, no native species in Ontario.
- **Tidy Tips:** Native to California.
- **Sweet Alyssum:** common annual in gardens, not native to Ontario. Some are native to Alberta and Montana.
- **Bergamot:** There are many kinds of Bergamots, otherwise known as Bee Balm. Some, such as Red Bergamot (*Monarda didyma*), Dotted Mint (*Monarda punctata*) and Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) are native to Ontario. Others are not. Without the botanical name, we can't know for sure which one this is.
- **Baby Blue Eyes:** There are 12 species listed under this common name, none of which is native to Ontario.
- **Corn Poppy:** There are 96 plants with the name "poppy" in them. None of them is listed as Corn Poppy.
- **Ohio Spiderwort:** This is *Tradescantia ohiensis*, native from Massachusetts to Maine and found in our region.

So here is my advice: the next time you feel like scattering some wildflower seeds, check the sources on the [Guildwood Butterflyway website](#) where we list some trusted suppliers of native wildflower plants and seeds. And then go forth and sow millions of native seeds. The birds, bees and butterflies will thank you!

By Allison Murray, April 2023