

Growing Home with Native Self-Sowers

For economy and ease of care, include self-sowing native plants in your garden.

BY JARED BARNES

NO MATTER what term you use to refer to self-sowers—pioneers, self-seeders, ruderals, or volunteers—these plants celebrate abundance. They cast thousands of themselves into our gardens (sometimes from a single plant!) and stake their claim to our soil where they will return for many years to come. And, for amateur gardeners or those starting new beds, self-sowers help make a garden look full and lush quickly.

While we revel in such blessings, sometimes too many plants can be a curse, as is the case with many exotic, introduced species that have invaded. Fortunately, we have many natives that we can use to fill our gardens with abundance, flowers, and food for wildlife. I find three characteristics of self-sowing natives to be most desirable for gardeners: covering the ground, offering bright color, and being floriferous.

COVERING NEW GROUND

Because self-sowers produce copious amounts of seed, they are effective at covering the ground. Bare soil is soon cloaked in a carpet of green. Why not have desirable plants in our garden that will fill those gaps instead of unsightly weeds?

Orange jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*, USDA Hardiness Zones 0–9) is one of my favorite self-sowers for shady, wet areas, and it is native to most of the eastern half



Orange jewelweed self-sows readily in shaded to partly sunny sites that have moist soil. Herbalists have long touted the use of the plant's sap as a balm for poison ivy and other skin irritations.



of the country. As a kid, I loved to find these plants along ditches and creek banks around my home in rural west Tennessee. Their orange, jewellike flowers and subsequent exploding seed pods were always a treat. It wasn't until I got older and started reading in James Duke's book, *The Green Pharmacy*, that I learned the plant could help to prevent poison ivy rash and also treat the dermatitis that follows.

I also have fond memories of woodland phlox (*Phlox divaricata*, Zones 3–8) blooming in the woods near my home and found throughout the eastern half of the U.S. On breezy spring days, I would stand and watch as the blue haze swayed on the forest floor. My parents also had this phlox in their garden. The blue-to-purple colors were always a welcome sight after a cold winter and their sweet fragrance wafts in the wind. While plants are perennial, they are short-lived

Top left: Native to the eastern United States, quick-growing partridge pea helps fix nitrogen in soil. Bottom left: Blanket flowers (*Gaillardia* spp.) are generally orange, but 'Grape Sensation', a two-foot-tall selection from Texas, bears red-purple blooms.

and benefit from being able to sow themselves around in your garden. I like combining them with other natives, such as yellow-flowered 'Corbett', a selection of our eastern red columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*, Zones 3–8)

Another native self-sower I learned from the backroads near my house was partridge pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*, Zones 3–9). Native to the eastern half of the country, this member of the bean family can quickly fill gaps in a planting. Their quick establishment and ability to fix nitrogen has earned their use not only in naturalistic plantings but also in restoration projects. The cheerful yellow flowers are a great source of nectar for pollinators. To me, the flowers look like dancers in draping yellow gowns with their arms open wide, ready to greet bees. The dark brown, sickle-shaped seedpods that follow are good forage for songbirds.

Blanket flowers (*Gaillardia* spp.) are also beautiful self-sowers, native to a broad swath of the South and Southwest. One of my favorites is 'Grape Sensation', a selection of the underused Texas native



Winkler's blanket flower (*G. aestivalis* var. *winkleri*, Zones 7–9). While the straight species is rare in the wild and commerce, this wonderful cultivar developed by Dawn Stover of Nacogdoches, Texas, is available in the trade. Several plants together will carpet the ground with verdant foliage, and the lovely flowers—which bloom all summer long—have wine-colored rays around darker central disks. Even from a distance, I can see bees working as the blooms bob up and down from their weight. After the flowers are pollinated, they become mini-geodesic domes of ornamental seedheads.

SOME LIKE IT HOT

Some annual self-sowers also give us hot bright flowers for the garden. These are a few of my favorites for eye-catching reds and stunning oranges.

One of the biggest impact self-sowers I grow in my garden is standing cypress (*Ipomopsis rubra*, Zones 6–9). Before this plant explodes into flower, it looks like a green Cousin It from the Addams Family with its highly dissected, silvery mounds of foliage. Of course, soon it reaches for the sky as it unfurls hundreds of tubu-



A biennial, standing cypress bears red flowers on three- to six-foot-tall stems in its second year.

lar-shaped red flowers that delight ruby-throated hummingbirds. Native to the central United States, this biennial is very adaptable and can even be grown on green

substrate. I prefer to grow it on the lean side because too much water and fertility can result in plants flopping.

Scarlet sage (*Salvia coccinea*, Zones 8–10) is a lovely southeastern U.S. native



Despite its name, California poppies grow well in lean, well-draining soil in many other parts of the country, as seen here in a Texas garden.

MORE SELF-SOWERS FOR THE GARDEN

Plant Name	Height	Ornamental Characteristics and Culture	Native Range	USDA Hardiness Zones
<i>Centaurea americana</i> (American basket flower)	2–5 ft.	Annual. Similar to thistle without the sharp prickles; fluffy, lavender flowers with a honey fragrance bloom in mid- to late spring. Part shade; average to dry alkaline soils	Central and southeastern U.S.	0–0
<i>Conoclinium coelestinum</i> (blue mist flower)	1½–3 ft.	Short-lived perennial. Clouds of fuzzy, periwinkle-blue flowers bloom in July into October. Full sun to part shade; average to wet soils. Can spread aggressively	Central and southeastern U.S.	5–10
<i>Delphinium carolinianum</i> (Carolina larkspur)	1–2 ft.	Perennial. Delicate, blue-violet blossoms on slender stalks flower April into June and attract hummingbirds. Full sun to part shade; average to well-drained, fertile soils	Central and southeastern U.S.	4–7
<i>Helenium amarum</i> ‘Dakota Gold’ (Dakota Gold sneezeweed)	12–14 in.	Annual. Bright gold, daisylike flowers cover the fine-cut foliage July into September. Full sun to part shade; well-drained to dry soils	Central and southern U.S.	0–0
<i>Helianthus argophyllus</i> (silver leaf sunflower)	4–7 ft.	Annual. Hairy, silvery foliage supports large cheerful sunflowers from late summer into autumn. Full sun; moist to well-drained soils	Southeastern U.S.	0–0
<i>Helianthus debilis</i> ‘Vanilla Ice’ (Vanilla ice sunflower)	3–4 ft.	Annual. Creamy white flowers on small-statured plants bloom late summer into fall. Full sun; moist well-drained soils	Southeastern U.S.	0–0
<i>Hymenopappus artemisiifolius</i> (old plainsman)	3–6 ft.	Biennial. Flowers start white, and then fade to a rosy pink. The silvery basal rosettes overwinter and then skyrocket into bloom in early spring. Part shade; well-drained to sandy soils	Southern U.S.	6–8
<i>Lobelia siphilitica</i> (blue cardinal flower)	2–3 ft.	Perennial. Robust tall flower spikes of bilabiate blue flowers welcome bees July into September. Full sun to full shade; moist to wet soils.	Central to southeastern U.S.	4–9
<i>Monarda citriodora</i> (lemon mint)	1–2½ ft.	Annual. Light lavender flowers with lemony fragrance bloom May to August. Full sun to part shade; average to dry, rocky soils	Southern U.S.	0–0
<i>Streptanthus maculatus</i> (clasping jewelflower)	2–3 ft.	Biennial. Purple, butterflylike flowers bloom in tall spikes in spring. Full sun to part shade; average to well-drained soils	Southern U.S.	6–8
<i>Stylophorum diphyllum</i> (celandine poppy)	1–1½ ft.	Perennial. Bright buttercup yellow flowers bloom in early spring above green, fuzzy foliage. Part shade to full shade; average to wet soils	Central U.S.	4–9

with rich red, bilabiate flowers that are magnets for ruby-throated hummingbirds. I’ve seen it growing around old homesteads, a reminder that gardeners once lived there. Plants can be perennial in the most southerly zones; their heart-leaved seedlings are easy to recognize and can be easily removed if too many plants return. Often self-sown plants will flower early in the year, leaving brown calyces later in the season. These can be cut back to encourage rebloom.

Another well-known self-sower is California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*, Zones 6–10), beloved for its dream-sicle-colored flowers that glow in the sunlight. I have swooned over the super blooms in California. Flowers are a bit picky and will open on full sun days and close at night or during poor weather. Even before it blooms, the dissected foliage with a blue-green patina is attractive in the garden. This species seems to do better in sandy areas of the garden or the edge

of a gravelly pathway, as too rich soil can result in fewer flowers and more foliage.

FLOWER POWER

Self-sowers are often flower powerhouses. Because of their short-lived nature, they try to produce as many seeds as they possibly can, and, to do that they must have plenty of flowers.

One of my favorite self-sowing annuals is annual black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*, Zones 3–8), which is found throughout the

country. Flowers appear for weeks during the summer. I'm particularly fond of the cultivar 'Indian Summer'. My parents have had it reseeding in their Tennessee garden, and now I've started plants at my house from their original planting. This cultivar is a tetraploid, which means that it has double the amount of DNA of the typical species, so flowers and leaves are larger than those of the wild species.

Another great flowering self-sowing native, plains coreopsis (*Coreopsis tinctoria*, Zones 0–0), thrives almost everywhere. My wife, Karen, loves the cheerful yellow flowers with mahogany highlights that explode into bloom on wiry stems. The cultivar 'Roulette' is particularly showy with its deep burgundy color. The epithet *tinctoria* means used in dyeing, and enthusiasts still use this plant to color fabric today.

Snow-on-the mountain (*Euphorbia marginata*, Zones 0–0) and snow-on-the-prairie (*E. bicolor*, Zones 6–9) are both colorful self-sowers found in the southern U.S. The white-and-green color is striking from a distance or up close. The showy white to cream-colored flowers are technically bracts, or modified leaves. If you keep bees, be forewarned that according to horticulturist extraordinaire Leslie Halleck of Dallas, Texas, both of these species

Spring-flowering Gulf Coast penstemon, top right, grows in moist soil and is a prolific self-seeder. Bottom right: Plains coreopsis is ideal for naturalizing in large areas such as meadows.

can make honey hot or bitter, resulting in what some beekeepers call "jalapeño honey." Because these plants bloom later in the year in her garden, Halleck harvests her honey in mid-July.

I have long adored penstemons for their colorful flowers, however, some of them can be finicky about returning each year. Gulf Coast penstemon (*Penstemon tenuis*, Zones 7–10), native to Texas and Arkansas solves that issue by being a vigorous self-sower. For me, it tends to be very short-lived, but produces copious amounts of seed. I've even seen it sow itself into containers of plants! The lilac-colored blooms are quite lovely early in the spring and I have mine planted near false indigo (*Baptisia australis*, Zones 3–9) to echo the purple hues. Once pollinated, the seed capsules can be dried and used in floral arrangements.



SELF-SOWERS IN YOUR GARDEN

Why is it that some species are more adapted to self-sowing than others? Much of a plant's capacity to return from seed depends on its survival strategy. Philip Grime, a British ecologist, studied these plant survival strategies, and classified plants based on their adaptations. For plant species that experienced frequent disturbance (the interruption of plant growth by fires, trampling by animals, mudslides, etc.), it is hard to survive for many years. Therefore, selection occurred over generations for traits like having a short lifespan and the production of copious amounts of seed. He called these plants ruderals, a name that refers to plants that grow in wastelands and gravelly areas.

With this knowledge, we can make our gardens more hospitable to self-sowing natives.

- Self-sowers begin to muddle our mental models of annual, biennial, and perennial, because some may take two or three years before they flower, and others may die out after only a few years. Therefore, be patient with them if they take a bit longer to flower or if they don't live as long as you anticipate, even if they carry labels like annual or perennial.

- Since these plants rely on getting started from seed, they must have soil contact. Be cautious overusing mulch, or apply mulch after self-sowers have emerged.

I like to have gravelly or sandy areas of my garden for self sowers. The lean soil also helps to reduce competition from other plants. Where a garden bed grades into a gravel path can be a perfect spot.

- Many self-sowers are great to have in a planting because if disturbance occurs from mammals or a plant dies out, they can quickly germinate and fill gaps.

- If you use pre-emergent herbicides to prevent weeds from germinating, those same compounds can also stop desirable self-sowing natives from popping up, too. Make sure you take care with using them around self-sowers. —J.B.

Sources

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www.fedcoseeds.com.

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www.mailordernatives.com.

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www.seedsource.com.

Prairie Moon Nursery, Winona, MN.
www.prairiemoon.com.

Select Seeds, Union, CT.
www.selectseeds.com.

White Flower Farm, Morris, CT.
whiteflowerfarm.com.

Wildseed Farms, Fredericksburg, TX.
www.wildseedfarms.com.


Resources

Cultivating Chaos: How to Enrich Landscapes with Self-Seeding Plants

by Jonas Reif, Christian Kress, and Jürgen Becker. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2015.

Plant Strategies, Vegetation Processes, and Ecosystem Properties by J. Philip Grime. Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, 2001.

One of the most famous native self-sowers is the Texas bluebonnet (*Lupinus texensis*, Zones 6–8). Viewing a sea of royal blue flowers in the wild will make you weak in the knees. As an indicator for pollinators, the largest petals on the flowers actually change color from white to pink about six days after opening. The tuft of white immature flowers at the top earned it the name *el conejo* or “the rabbit” from the Spanish settlers who saw it and thought it resembled a bunny's tail. In Texas, I've seen it thrive in patio cracks and roadside shoulders. If you find yourself struggling to grow Texas bluebonnet in your locale, try sandyland bluebonnet (*L. subcarinosus*, Zones 0–0), which is native a bit further east.

While these dozen or so plants I've shared with you—plus the additional ones covered in the chart on page 33—are just the beginning, I hope that I have whetted your appetite for finding more that will perform in your yard. 

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Although a self-seeder, Texas bluebonnet (*Lupinus texensis*) can be finicky and is generally a challenge to grow outside its native range. Here it creates a spectacular display in a Texas field.