

Planting a Spring Meadow

Written by B Bennett for Scripps Mesa Garden Club, 2020

A meadow is so much! From afar it is tranquility, beauty, rest, and an oasis. Closer it becomes colorful and intriguing. And then within, it is layers of diversity; thick, scratchy and humming.

For me, a meadow represents a new year and the faithful reawakening of life. Here in San Diego we behold spring with the greening and flowering of the chaparral along with patches of orange California poppies, *Eschscholzia californica*, on our grassy inland hills.

But you can also add a spring meadow right in your own yard – and it is surprisingly simple.

Here are views of the meadow in my backyard in May 2020



Soil. The good news about planting a meadow is that you do not need fancy soil. Our sandy, rocky and alkaline dirt should do just fine. Because the visual impact of a meadow is enhanced by volume it is best to set aside a minimum of 100

square feet, but the more the merrier. If you choose rows or strips then try to have at least 4 ft widths to allow for the meadow to support itself vertically as plants tend to lean on each other. Slopes, undulations or flat ground are fine. Just make sure it is open and exposed to sun.

Choose your seeds. There are many affordable meadow seed mixes available either from online retailers or in local garden stores. Check they are suitable for the southwest and lower altitudes. A Rocky Mountain alpine meadow mix looks great in the advertising, but it will struggle in southern California. I have used Stover's California Wildflower seed from Home Depot (\$17) which has 12 or more species as my core mix. Then I buy individual seed packets for other species I particularly enjoy and add them in.

Prepare. Watch for the first good rain in November or December. This triggers any weeds to germinate and sprout. Once the weeds have covered the ground (2-4 weeks after the rain) remove them using a hoe or a dose of glyphosate herbicide (e.g. Round Up). If you choose to use herbicide wait a couple more weeks for the weeds to die off and for the herbicide to fully degrade.

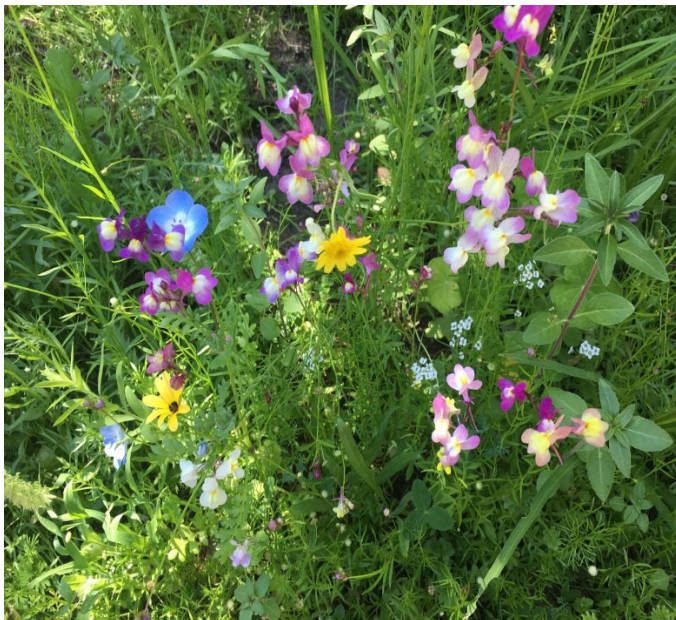
Scraping the surface with a hoe to remove emergent weeds



Get busy. In January use a hoe or rake to rough up the top half inch of dirt. Take a bucket and put in some dry sand or dry loose dirt to about half-full. Mix in the recommended amount of seed. By increasing the volume of the seed plant mix you will get a more even distribution when you hand cast the seed. Walk the meadow and throw the seed plant mix over the ground. You should see plenty of seed on the ground once you are finished. Use a rake to spread the seed and then smooth the surface. Water thoroughly using a sprinkle or spray. Avoid using a hose stream as this will clog the soil and bury the seed. If it does not rain at convenient intervals keep the ground damp using a sprinkle or spray. Avoid walking over the ground as this will compact the soil and stifle the new sprouts. If you have a large area you can map a path through the meadow.

Be patient. A meadow is not a lawn. It is a mixture of species with their own timelines and growth patterns. Sunnier patches will grow more quickly than shadier patches, but the latter may last longer. Some species need the protection of pioneer species to get going before they takeover. The beauty of the meadow is that it keeps changing over 3-4 months of flowering. The beginning of March should bring the first flowers of white *Alyssum*. Then *Collinsia*, *Phacelia*, *Osteospermum* and *Cosmos*. Still later *Clarkia*, *Borago*, *Lupinus* and *Papaver*.

Early meadow flowers



Late meadow flowers



Watering. If you want your meadow to keep flowering into June you will need to provide supplemental water. I have found that a sprinkler every 3-4 days is best.

While the delicate flower stems may lean because of the weight of water they do spring back. Be careful using a hose to flow water at ground level as it seems the roots of some species lose their grip causing the whole plant to roll over.

Fertilizer. Not necessary, but... if you do want to turbocharge growth then throw a couple handfuls of pellet fertilizer over the meadow in early April once plants are established. Do not over fertilize.

Cut flowers. Yes! Your meadow will provide wonderful bouquets. Furthermore, as you remove flowers and dead heads it will stimulate yet more flowering.

Good bugs not bad. Your meadow is a seasonal gift to the insect world. You should see plenty of honeybees and bumblebees and miniature bees that have no name (that I know of) along with swallowtail, mourning cloak and painted lady butterflies. Although I have seen some caterpillars and grasshoppers they do not seem to be detrimental to the growth of the meadow.

Summer. Chances are that by late June the meadow will be fading and you have a choice to make. If you prefer a clean look or want the area for other uses you can mow the meadow down to ground level. Or, if you prefer to let the natural cycle take its course you can leave the meadow to fully seed and dry out. It will look messy, but seed eating birds and lizards will use it as food and habitat. If you do leave the meadow to seed some of this will germinate in the following winter rain. However, unless you are scrupulous in removing weeds from your flowering meadow it is likely the weeds will overtake the meadow in subsequent years. Hence, I recommend starting anew each year with soil preparation and fresh seeding.

Connect. This past year I selected the Shirley poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, as my experimental addition to the meadow and they were spectacular. So, I will end this article with a poppy anecdote. Prior to World War I, poppies were an occasional sight in the fields of Europe. Each spring during the war they became more and more abundant across the battlefield until by 1918 they carpeted the landscape and were adopted as the symbol of armistice and remembrance. Poppy seeds can lie dormant for 50 or more years. Apparently, the churning of the earth, the phosphate and nitrogen from bombs and gas, and perhaps, too, the

blood of millions of lives combined to stimulate the re-emergence of the poppy.
Another reminder that nature is always ready to beautify our messes.

In Flanders Fields
John McCrae

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

