



*An annual mix brightens Riverside Drive in Dundee. © Dundee City Council.*

## Annual seed mixes for public display

Alison Anderson, Andrew Hogarth & Keith Jackson

Annual seed mixes have become popular with an increasing number of Scottish local authorities in recent years as they can brighten up public areas at relatively low cost. Fife started using these mixes around 2009 following a visit to the Pictorial Meadows Social Enterprise in Sheffield. A further boost was given by TV coverage of the large areas sown for the 2012 Olympic Games in London. They are often referred to as wildflower mixes sometime even as wildflower meadows which is misleading on two counts as they often include non-native plants to give more variety such as Californian poppies while many ecologists would argue a true meadow is based on permanent grass. Some of the most popular mixes are sold as urban meadow mixes. A native cornfield annual mix will typically contain blue cornflowers, red poppies, yellow corm marigolds and white mayweed/chamomile. Its

drawback from an aesthetic viewpoint is that it has a relatively short flowering season. Most of the mixes now in use have other non-native seeds added such as cosmos to prolong the flowering period. Insects certainly make use of them. Although of benefit to wildlife they are more realistically thought of as a form of gardening rather than nature reserves. Our experience has been with relatively large areas such as roundabouts and roadside verges but these mixes can just as effectively be used on a smaller scale in private gardens.

### Cultivation

To create the best floral effect you need to eliminate less desirable species such as thistles and docks before sowing. These mixes can be sown in the autumn or early spring. Sowing can be an ideal opportunity for involving local school children.

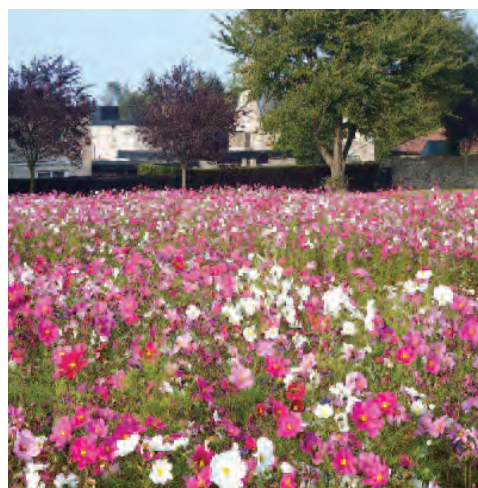




*Cornfield annuals in North Berwick. © R. Oberlander.*



*Variation in Dundee. © Dundee City Council.*



*(left) A late sowing of poppies flowering in autumn. (right) Cosmos in October in East Lothian. © S. da Prato.*





(left) *Coreopsis* dominates a Tranent roundabout. © Andrew Hogarth. (right) Annuals in a narrow roadside strip. © Ian Craigie.



(left) A berm to discourage fly tipping. © A. Hogarth. (right) Annual colour in Kirkcaldy. © Growing Kirkcaldy.



(left) Fife corn marigolds. (right) People enjoying the flowers in Fife. © Beautiful Fife.





*Very different results from the same seed mix in East Lothian.*



*Grasses appearing in a bed left for more than one season. © A .Hogarth.*

According to the time sown and soil conditions, a different balance of species will result. If sown in spring mayweed and corn marigold tend to dominate. Annuals as their name implies only live for a year, set seed and die. They naturally exist where soil is disturbed, and competition from perennial plants such as grasses is reduced. The most striking example of this occurred on the battlefields of World War One where thousands of red poppies bloomed in ground that had been ripped up by shellfire.

Towards the end of the season the displays can look rather tired as flowers fade and plants die off. To get a really good display in later years most authorities don't rely on self-seeding but cultivate and sow afresh. If you wish to try using your own seed, allow the flowers to set seed, cut down in late summer but then leave for a few weeks before lifting the dead material to allow seed to drop into the ground. Any grasses and perennial weeds that appear can then be removed by hand or by spraying with a systemic herbicide. You still need to cultivate in the autumn, rake the soil and, possibly, sow extra seed as well. We often find that when the same seed is used on an area year after year the display deteriorates. If space permits it can be helpful to move the area for example by moving from the front of a verge towards the back. Some mixes are available that include perennial grasses and other wildflowers along with hardy annuals. These aim to provide quick colour from the annuals in the first season then develop into a permanent meadow. In practice what plants this will ultimately support will vary greatly according to the soil and other local conditions. Just because certain desirable perennial wildflowers are in the seed packet does not guarantee they will thrive in your patch of soil! With these and where annual mixes have been left to evolve naturally regular attention will still be needed to prevent the area being taken over by coarser and less attractive plants.

## Reaction

The public reaction in all our three council areas has been extremely positive. Since the flowers are often highly visible from roads they are seen by literally thousands of local people including many who never visit our parks. Some of the mixes use annual seeds from non-native sources and it is important that they do not get anywhere near conservation areas. The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) makes it illegal to plant or otherwise cause a plant to grow in the wild at a place outwith its native range. In Fife advice was taken and it was accepted that these plants would not impact on urban areas but caution is needed in the wider countryside.

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