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Garden or Prairie in a Can? Hold It!

Wildflower Seed Mixes Include Some Wicked Bloomers

The seed packets have labels with romantic-sounding names such as meadow mixture and wedding wildflowers, while others tout backyard biodiversity and make reference to Earth Day. But watch out!

When growing 19 such packets of wildflower mixes, University of Washington researchers found that each contained from three to 13 invasive species and eight had seeds for plants considered noxious weeds in at least one US state or Canadian province.

And what makes it nearly impossible for conscientious gardeners is that a third of the packets had no content listing and a little more than another third had inaccurate lists. Only five of the 19 correctly itemized all seeds.

"I can't recommend using any wildflower seed mixes," says Lorraine Brooks, who did the work at the UW's Center for Urban Horticulture while earning her bachelor's degree.

The seed mixes used in this experiment were produced at or distributed from a variety of US and Canadian locations, not just the Pacific Northwest. Firms with catalog or web site sales could be selling wildflower mixes to gardeners all across North America and not just to gardeners in the area where the mix is produced.

Brooks found the least unruly of the wildflower mixes was a packet from which 30 of the 106 plants that sprouted and produced flowers were invasive — that's 28 percent of what grew. From another packet, all identified species were invasive in at least one part of the country and, although the three species in the packet labeled "native" are native to North America, they are certainly not native to all regions. For example, only one species is believed to be native to the Pacific Northwest and it represented one percent of what grew. Among the worst mixes were two that each contained two noxious weed species.



These "gardens-in-a-can" mixtures were sold at a popular store in the upper Midwest during the summer of 2002. The "American Heritage" bottle claimed to include "patriotic wildflowers from 1776," but did not list any contents at all. The others listed the seed varieties, many of which were problem plants such as bachelor's button and yellow toadflax.

Gardeners might be surprised at the flowers and seeds that are readily available for sale that are considered invasive or noxious. For instance, the wildflower most commonly observed as part of the mixes was the popular bachelor's button (*Centaurea cyanus*), germinating in beautiful hues of pink and blue from three-quarters of the packets tested. Bachelor's button might be fine if kept confined to one's own yard, but it's invasive when it gets into native grasslands and prairies. It hasn't been named a noxious weed but it is on Washington State's "education list" in the hope that property owners will become knowledgeable about the risks of growing it.

Yellow toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris*), on the other hand, is listed as a noxious weed in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and 11 other states and provinces. Colorado, for example, classifies it among the top-10 prioritized noxious-weed species, those that are most widespread and cause the greatest impact. In King County the plant is a "principal weed for control," an even stronger designation than Washington State's listing of it as a Class C noxious weed.

With yellow flowers tinged with orange that resemble snapdragon blossoms, toadflax was found in four of the wildflower mixes. Only one listed it.

Even labels that refer to wildflowers as native should be avoided because everything, after all, is native to someplace, but that place may not be where you live. 🌱

(Source: 2002 press release prepared by the University of Washington.)

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