

Late Blooming Wildflowers

THE SECRET TO AN ENDLESS SUMMER

Blake Goll, Nature Education Coordinator at
Willistown Conservation Trust

THERE'S A CERTAIN WITCHCRAFT that settles into an autumn wildflower meadow. The ironweed and goldenrod create a dreamlike palette of deep hypnotic violet and harvest yellow, while brown seedpods add a cathartic nostalgia to the romantic cornucopia. In the September wind, swaying stems, quivering blooms and fluttering wings create the same serenity one feels gazing out onto an oceanscape.

Yet, unlike the ocean, in the meadow you're surrounded by extraordinary winged animals everywhere you look. Even after gardeners have finished the season's weeding, children have gone back to school, and beach bags have been stowed away, the energy of summer continues here.

Flashy goldfinches frolic across the meadow from one sunflower to the next, honeybees covered in pollen eagerly wriggle among the velvet petals of the mountain mint, and butterflies of myriad species—monarchs, fritillaries, sulfurs, buckeyes, skippers, swallowtails—dance with rapture around the profusion of aster blooms! Indeed, late September and October are the pollinator after-party, where the champagne of the aster takes center stage.

NATIVE PLANTS AND NATIVE INSECTS

Contributing in a meaningful way to this kind of biodiversity throughout the year and deep into the fall starts with mindful plant selection.

Although many plants available in garden centers and nurseries are beautiful, only native plants function well in our ecosystem's food webs.

This is ultimately because plants don't want to be eaten. Consequently, plants have developed chemical defenses against the insects drawn to them, which in turn set in motion an arms race for the insects to develop ways around these defenses.

As a result of many years of evolution, our native insects specialize in targeting species of native plants. For example, a native oak tree can be used as a caterpillar host plant for 500 native species of butterflies and moths, although a non-native ginkgo (native to China) supports only about five of our native insect species.

AND BIRDS

It follows then that a wildflower meadow filled with native perennials is a self-sustaining bird feeder filled with insects, a major food supply for most North American land birds. This is especially true in the summer when, for example, one pair of chickadees must feed their young up to 500 caterpillars a day. In September and October when some of the flowers are spent, finches and sparrows feast on the seeds to prepare for the cold weather ahead.

During the cooler months, billions of birds are migrating south and may stop to hunt insects and spiders in a wildflower meadow. And finally, during the winter the unmown wildflower meadow can provide nourishing seeds in an otherwise barren landscape for overwintering birds like dark-eyed juncos.

KALEIDOSCOPE OF WILDFLOWERS

Part of the joy of a wildflower meadow is the long-lived kaleidoscope of colors changing throughout the seasons and extending into fall. The show starts in mid-June with beardtongue, butterfly milkweed, and false sunflower creating a lively tapestry of white, orange and yellow. Common milkweed—a big whimsical ball of tiny pink flowers—also fluoresces at this time, luring many pollinators including the iconic monarch butterfly.

Late June is greeted with delicate sprays of white of the Virginia mountain mint, bright fuchsia of the purple coneflower and the fanciful blue petals of the curious spiderwort. July is the peak display with splashes of lavender of wild bergamot, dusty rose-colored Joe Pye weed and multi-colored garden phlox. Finally the robust August performers of asters, ironweed, trumpet honeysuckle and goldenrod do not tire until well into October, helping sustain migrant species like monarchs and ruby-throated hummingbirds.

A WILDFLOWER GARDEN

While this profusion of color and life is occurring aboveground, something marvelous is occurring below the earth. Native wildflowers spend the first couple of years developing impressive root systems that can stretch 8 to 12 feet underground, allowing them to mine groundwater. Compare that to your typical Kentucky bluegrass lawn—with roots barely reaching 6 inches—and you can see how much hardier native wildflowers are.

Even setting aside a few drifts on your property for wildflowers instead of lawn grass can substantially reduce your water usage. Mowing your wildflower patch is also necessary only once a year in early



Butterfly milkweed in July

spring. Leaving the wildflower growth during the fall and winter months provides habitat for overwintering birds, cocoons and other wildlife.

Not only are native wildflowers easy to care for, they're also relatively easy to establish. Simply stop mowing a manageable sunny area of your property in the spring and tuck a thoughtful variety of landscape plugs into the ground among the existing lawn, each plug about one square foot apart.

The planted plugs may need occasional water at first if you notice wilting, but within a month or two their tough roots will be able to sustain the plants. Yearly weeding may be needed during the first few years until the perennials reach their full competitive size.

That's all it takes.

As you wistfully take in those last sips of summer from the September air, look around your yard and think about where you could begin to enhance your garden with the unparalleled natural beauty of wildflowers. This time next year as the rest of your garden begins to rest, you could be



Spiderwort and false sunflowers in late June

reveling in your endless summer landscape of late blooming color and life. ♦

Willistown Conservation Trust, a nonprofit land trust that's protected over 7,200 acres of wildlife habitat, scenic views and agricultural lands in the Willistown area, has a mission to inspire in people a lifelong love of the land through education. Its Rushton Farm bird banding station is open to the public through November and the one-acre wildflower meadow at the Trust headquarters is also open for viewing. 925 Providence Rd., Newtown Square. More at WCTrust.org.



Variegated fritillaries on aster in late September

Tiger swallowtail on garden phlox in July
PHOTOS BY BLAKE GOLL