



By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

Wild(flower)ly Successful

If you want to try planting bluebonnets that turn Hill Country fields a hue that rivals the sky, get busy now. But beware — this flower is willful enough to make grown men weep, or at least go gray or bald while trying to coax it out of the soil. Growing other wildflowers might be a bit easier, especially if you follow the directions of John Thomas, founder of Wildseed Farms. The balding Thomas jokes that he had a full head of hair when he began his business trying to grow bluebonnets.

"They'd come up and die," Thomas said. "I found out the hard way." The mistake was trying to grow them around Houston, which is flat and gets a lot of rain — two things bluebonnets don't like, he said. Bluebonnets do not like "wet feet," and they prefer slopes. Those preferences make the Hill Country a natural habitat for the flower. Even so, "They are probably one of the hardest wildflowers to grow," Thomas noted.

Some of Thomas' advice, based on years of experience, translates well to other locales.

- Plant what grows in your area. Look at the roadsides, on fences and in ditches to see what comes up naturally.
- Early fall through November is the best time to plant. The month of October is a good time. December is getting late. Wildflowers will grow in January, Thomas says, but "people who plant then and get any are lucky."
- Buy scarified seed for quick germination. Scarified seeds are treated to remove growth-inhibiting properties. Collecting the seed from your plants after they have bloomed and transplanting them likely won't produce the results you'd like.
- Use about a pound of seed for 2,000 square feet. Distribute seed evenly between two buckets. Take one bucket and broadcast seeds by hand, as if you are feeding chickens. Walk north and south, until you have walked the whole plot back and forth. Take the other bucket and walk east and west, broadcasting the seed in the same way, to make sure you cover your area completely. This will give an even distribution.
- The best seeding time is the afternoon when dew has disappeared. Rake the seed lightly or walk on top of it to make it stick to the soil. Broadcast the seed on loose soil, not soil with a thick crust on top.
- Keep the ground wet until you see seedling heads. Then put your hose away. Seedlings that get too much water will grow leggy and fail to thrive.
- Most Texas wildflowers are reseeding annuals. They die and reseed, and next year's crop must start over from seed on the ground as well as what you add. A healthy stand takes two to three years to establish, Thomas said. "We have good years and bad," he said, noting that the beauty of the wildflower depends largely on fall rains. "Start out slow and build up."



Bluebonnets growing among the rocks