



## Wildflowers for the Home Garden

June 2009 "In the Garden" from the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum  
Podcast and web video at [arboretum.unl.edu](http://arboretum.unl.edu)

Nebraska celebrates wildflowers this month with wildflower walks, workshops and other events all across the state. Why wildflowers? They offer a sense of place, making a small landscape fit into the larger environment around it. They attract pollinators, birds and wildlife. They're adapted to our soils, winds and temperature fluctuations.

Possibly the most important thing they offer is a sense of wonder... as we watch some of the most fragile and ephemeral of plants claiming survivor status in coarse, grazed pastures or neglected woodlands. To be honest, some wildflowers are thugs that need the intense competition of deep-rooted grasses to stay in their place. But there are many native wildflowers well worth trying in the home garden. Here's a sampling of early summer wildflowers that are mostly ephemeral, and best combined with grasses or other perennials to hide dormant stems.

Dwarf spiderwort, *Tradescantia tharpaii*, has narrow, hairy leaves that emerge in early spring. Flowers, from blue to purple to rose to pink, cover plants in May. Semi-dormant in the heat of summer, it reappears in fall with another flush of growth and flowering; it will naturalize and reseed itself. Needs full sun, prefers well-drained loam and can tolerate drier sites. Common name derives from thread-like, silky stem secretions, similar to a spider's web.

Prairie phlox, *Phlox pilosa*, is a native phlox with rose/pink flowers May and June. Grows best in full sun and well-drained soil and is more tolerant of dry soils than most phlox.

Prairie ragwort, *Senecio plattensis*, is a 6-12" biennial or short-lived perennial with upright clusters of yellow daisy-like flowers in mid or late spring. Basal leaves are semi-evergreen. It prefers full to part sun and dry conditions and will colonize over time.

Logan Calhoun poppymallow, *Callirhoe alcaeoides* 'Logan Calhoun', has sparkling white wine cups on 1' plants that can spread to 4' wide. For new growth, shear back after late spring flowering. Best in full sun; avoid overwatering.

Shell-leaf penstemon, *Penstemon grandiflorus* and *P. grandiflorus* 'Prairie Snow'. Like all penstemons, they prefer full, hot sun and sandy loam and may be short-lived in rich or clay soils. Leaving seedheads through winter will encourage self-sowing.

Golden or yellow flax, *Linum sulcatum*, has intensely yellow flower clusters in June and July.

Wild larkspur, *Delphinium virescens*, is a native annual that reseeds. It grows to about 3', has delicate white flowers through the summer and can handle dry soils.

### Slow but Long-lived

Some of the longest-lived perennials are slow to establish—early growth occurs underground rather than above. Because of that, they're not very appealing confined in small containers at garden centers. Once established, however, they're extremely long-lived and worth the wait.

Dwarf wild indigo, *Baptisia minor*, has beautiful indigo blue spikes of flowers in early summer. It prefers full sun and dry, well-drained soil and can tolerate clay if not continually wet. Rich, chocolate brown seed pods are attractive and persistent.

Red root, *Ceanothus ovatus*, is similar to New Jersey tea (*C. Americanus*). It grows to 3' high and has white blossoms in June. Though it can grow in a wide range of conditions and soils, it prefers dry soil in full sun. Young leaves can be used for tea by steeping them in boiling water for several minutes.

Leadplant, *Amorpha canescens*, has soft, silvery green foliage. Dark purple spike-like racemes rise above the foliage in June and July. Very drought-tolerant, it requires full sun and can handle poor, sandy soils. Common name refers to early belief that it indicated lead in the ground.

Dwarf leadplant, *Amorpha nana*, is the smallest and least common amorpha. Its fragrant purple flowers contrast beautifully with the orange anthers. A drought-tolerant plant for full sun.