



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Plant now for spring poppies!

Question: “I feel like a failure. My neighbors have California poppies. Some of them are even blooming now! But I plant the seed and get nothing. What am I doing wrong?”

Poppies like full sun, soil that doesn't stay soggy, and most types prefer cool weather for their main cycle of growth and bloom. They don't need fertilizer or any special soil amendment. But getting our native species started can be a little tricky. Once established they are carefree.

Our California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) doesn't fit neatly into the categories of garden plants that horticulturists have devised. Annual or perennial? California poppy is typically planted in fall for spring bloom, then pulled out in summer. But plants can last for 2 to 3 years if you cut them back instead of pulling them at the start of hot weather.

Which season does it bloom? Peak bloom begins in late winter and continues until hot weather. But young seedlings can start blooming in fall, and older plants that are cut back in early summer may resprout and give a scattering of flowers. California poppies in established stands can blossom any time of year.

When should it be planted? Seeds are best sown in early fall, right before or during a rainstorm. In other words, right now! Seeding in spring barely gives the plant time to bloom and set seeds before hot weather, though it may work. Young plants from the garden center can be planted any time early fall through mid-spring.

For a long time, I didn't recommend transplanting California poppies. Poppies have fragile tap roots that break easily. Standard recommendation has been to direct-seed them in place. But we get complaints from people who plant the seed and get sparse results. Meanwhile, their neighbor has poppies sprouting up all over the garden.

Common errors in planting poppies.

- Planting too early.

Germination is poor in warm soil and the plants grow poorly, often rotting at the crown.

- Covering the seed.

Poppy seed needs light to germinate. If you bury the seed, or cover it with compost, or have leaves and debris on top of it, the seed lies dormant and waits. And waits. Eventually something disturbs the soil and removes the cover, and suddenly the seedlings sprout as if from nowhere.

- Planting it where other plants out-compete the young seedlings.

Our native wildflower has been declining in acreage in the state for many years due to competition from introduced grass weed species that grow fast and shade out the little poppy seedlings. Our native grasses were much lower growing and were compatible with poppies.

You can't just throw the seed where winter weeds grow and expect the poppies to succeed. I have found that planting young starts of the first few poppy plants, and carefully clearing weeds away through the winter, is the most reliable way to get a population growing.

How to plant a California poppy border.



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Last year I did an experiment. I recently had some construction done, and a new gravel driveway was put in that has open areas of soil on either side. “Disturbed soil” is perfect for poppies. So on one side I scattered five packets of poppy seed. I watered thoroughly, and continued sprinkling every morning.

For the other side I started seeds in six-packs, putting a tiny pinch of seeds in each section of the pack. Those seeds sprouted quickly, and within about three weeks the roots were showing at the bottom of the pots. I very gently transplanted each bunch of seedlings out into nice, loose soil, watered with care, and cursed my dog for stepping on one group.

The results?

In each transplant group, the seedlings thinned themselves out to the strongest two or three plants. All took immediately and began to grow (except the trampled ones). By mid-winter I had a long border of poppies in bloom. From those plants I have a solid mass of seedlings already underway for next year. There are even a few blooms already. Every bit of bare soil within about three feet of the original plants is now a carpet of seedlings.

On the other side, from five packets of seed I got three plants. My guess is that was about a 1% success rate. They did reseed: I see a dozen or so new plants for this year. Maybe in another year that side of the driveway will have caught up in plant density.

The good news is that ultimately you only need a plant or two to get started. Each poppy plant produces many seed capsules, each capsule contains many dozens of seeds, and the capsules split and scatter their seeds to a distance of several feet. So buying and planting a single plant may be all you need, if you’re patient.

Other poppies we can grow.

The start of the rainy season is also when we plant other types of poppies for winter and spring bloom.

Flanders poppy.

Papaver rhoeas

“In Flanders fields the poppies grow....” The poppy of John McCrae’s famous poem from World War I is the red field poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*), also known as the corn poppy, Shirley poppy (named for a village in England, not some lady named Shirley), Flanders poppy, and Remembrance poppy as a symbol of Remembrance Day and Memorial Day.

Why did fields of red poppies grow where battles had occurred? First, the poppies were said to have largely disappeared during the war, probably due to the trampling and bombing of the fields. Then perhaps disturbance of the soil (“between the crosses, row on row...”) brought seed to the surface and vast fields of blooms followed.

Maybe they just noticed them again; Flanders poppy can easily fill agricultural fields due to the huge volume of seed they produce, seed which can lie dormant for a long time. Seed counts of the red field poppy yielded over 2500 seed per square foot. Our native species likewise increases once established, and in the absence of competition can cover whole hillsides.

Do Flanders poppies grow here? Sure. Plant them now for bloom next spring. Usually on seed racks they’re labeled as Shirley poppies.

Iceland poppy.

Papaver nudicaule.



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It seems odd that a sub-polar species would grow well in our area. Iceland poppies grow in the high latitude parts of Europe and North America, and the high latitudes and altitudes of Asia: Mongolia, Siberia, Alaska, Yukon (but, oddly, not Iceland). It's their tolerance for frost and cool conditions that makes them ideal for flowers in winter and early spring.

Described as perennial, Iceland poppies rarely survive our summers here, so they are treated as cool-season annuals. The big papery blooms in brilliant colors seem to float above the foliage, because the stems are leafless (nudi = naked, caule = stem).

This one is not very easy from seed. Buy young plants anytime fall through early spring for blooms from about February to April. One of the best poppies for mass plantings.

Oriental poppy.

Papaver orientale.

Huge flowers on a plant with big coarse hairy leaves. It's described in most references as perennial, but in the hot Valley here the plant often dies after flowering. So plant in the fall for a great, but brief, show in about May.

Bread poppy.

Papaver somniferum. There are lots of varieties grown for the large, showy flowers, as well as some grown specially for the seed for baking.

Wait. Is it legal to grow *Papaver somniferum*? The opium poppy? Well, the answer is [note: the following statement is not legal advice and is intended strictly for educational and entertainment purposes]: maybe. Probably. Gardeners have long noticed that you can readily buy the seeds of these poppies from mail-order companies. One assumes that if they can sell them, you can grow them, right? The consensus seems to be that it's legal to grow varieties of *P. somniferum* and the subspecies *P. s. paeoniflorum* for ornamental and culinary purposes, but not with intent to process the pods. Michael Pollan goes into much rather fretful detail here:

<http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/opium-made-easy/>

They are best started in pots in fall, then planted out very carefully; the roots and stems are very fragile. Take care that they don't get crowded by other plants through the winter, as they grow very slowly in the cold weather. The foliage is kind of coarse, and the plants sprawl.

In February the plants suddenly expand and in April large buds start to push upward. The flowers are enormous, spectacular, and hugely attractive to bees.

The variety that I grew last year was the Single Danish Flag poppy. In December I wondered if I'd wasted the space. In February I wondered if I'd given them enough space. In May I was rewarded with the giant flowers. Worth the wait.

Another native poppy

All of the poppies mentioned above are closely related members of the genus *Papaver*. We do have a native perennial, a different genus in the same family, that is worth considering for informal low-water landscapes. Matilija poppy (*Romneya coulteri*) is a big plant to 4 to 5 feet or taller, with a kind of rangy growth habit and bold-textured gray-green leaves. The stems are topped by giant white flowers with yellow centers; hence the common name "fried-egg flower." It is planted from divisions that you purchase and plant, and fall is a great time to do that. Be aware that it spreads by rhizomes. Not for a tidy yard!



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California poppy:



California poppy can bloom during many months of the year. Here a seedling that sprouted in September is already blooming in late October.



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Learn to recognize the seedlings! The delicate ferny foliage is distinctive. Be sure to take a few minutes to pull any weeds that crowd them when they're small.



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By the second year you may get carpets of California poppy seedlings like this, reseeding from the previous year. You don't need to thin them out, but you can carefully transplant seedlings out to other parts of the yard.



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The soft green fern-like foliage of California poppies is attractive and makes a great contrast to the vivid orange flowers.



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Shirley poppy:



This garden on 8th Street, featured in my Davis Enterprise column last spring, has Shirley poppies mixed with irises, gazania, and cornflowers.



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Iceland poppy:



Iceland poppy blooms look delicate, but the plants readily withstand winter cold. Heaviest bloom period here is February through April, though they may flower even in December and January in mild weather. Mass plantings are spectacular.



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Danish flag poppy:



Danish flag poppy is named for the white cross in the center. This is one of many garden varieties of *Papaver somniferum*, grown just for the showy huge flowers. Big plants with blooms 3 to 4 feet tall. Bees love the blossoms.



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Matilija poppy:



Another California native, Matilija poppy is a large, spreading perennial. The white-with-yellow blooms lead to the common name “fried egg flower.” There are plantings in some of the city greenbelts. Easy, but beware: it spreads!