

How to Grow Poppies



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Annuals

Corn poppy *Papaver rhoeas*, grows 2 to 3 feet tall, blooms from late spring through summer and bears red, purple, lilac, white, salmon, peach, pink or orange flowers with a distinctive dark blotch at the base of each petal. The Shirley poppy, a selection from the species, grows to 4 feet tall; its pastel blooms lack the blotch but have a narrow white or tinted edge on each petal.



Perennials

Alpine poppy *P. alpinum*, grows 5 to 10 inches tall, blooms from late spring to summer and bears white, yellow, or occasionally orange or red flowers. It is hardy in Zones 5 to 8.

Iceland poppy *P. nudicaule*, grows 1 to 2 feet tall, blooms from late spring through summer and produces orange, red, yellow, apricot, pink, salmon or white flowers. It is hardy in Zones 2 to 8.

Oriental poppy *P. orientale*, grows 2 to 4 feet tall, blooms from late spring to midsummer and bears scarlet, salmon, pink, peach, white or rose blooms, usually with a black blotch at the base of the petals. The foliage dies back after flowering but begins to regrow in fall. It is hardy in Zones 4 to 9.





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How to Grow from Seed

Poppies grow easily from seed. Be sure to select the correct species for an annual or perennial planting. They are known for self-sowing, sometimes with abandon, and you may find seedlings popping up all around the garden bed. They are not invasive and the seedlings are easy to pull up if they land in unwanted places.



Outdoors

Poppies are frost tolerant and germinate best in cool weather and soil. Sow seeds as early as the ground can be worked in spring. In warm areas, Zones 7 and higher, you can sow poppies in autumn; seedlings will begin to grow early the following spring. Poppies bloom profusely under cool growing conditions. When temperatures rise poppy plants tend to bloom only sporadically.



- ★ Select a site in full sun, one that receives at least six hours of direct sun daily. In warm climates (zones), plants do best with some protective shade at midday.
- ★ Prepare the soil first. Poppies grow in almost any kind of soil with good drainage. Waterlogged soil, especially in winter, is one of the main reasons some perennials such as Iceland poppies fail to survive from one year to the next. If your soil has poor drainage, amend it by digging in a couple of inches of compost.
- ★ Mix the tiny poppy seeds with some sand to make even spacing easier. Sow thinly where you want the plants to grow in the bed.



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If you plan to make your own “wildflower mix” for a small meadow planting, add 3-4 parts sand to 1 part seed to the mix to help you keep the seeds separated and less likely to clump too close together for satisfactory germination. This also saves some of the task of thinning.

- ★ Do not bury the seeds. Cover them with a very thin layer of fine soil (poppies germinate best with some light) and water the area. Keep the soil moist, but not soggy, until seeds germinate. At a soil temperature of 55 degrees expect germination in 10-15 days.
- ★ When seedlings are about 1 inch tall, thin them to stand 6 to 10 inches apart.
- ★ When you grow annual poppies sow more than once during spring to extend the color season in the garden.

Indoors

- ★ Start seeds 6 to 8 weeks before your average last spring frost.
- ★ Because poppies resent transplanting, sow seeds in biodegradable pots that go in the ground with the plant.
- ★ Moisten the germinating mix before sowing; fill 2-1/2-inch or larger pots to within 1/2-inch of the rim.
- ★ To avoid over seeding each container, combine some sand with the seeds, empty them onto a creased piece of paper, and gently tap them out onto the germinating mix. Sprinkle a thin layer of germinating mix or vermiculite over the surface then spritz with water to settle the seeds.
- ★ Cover the pots with plastic to help the mix retain moisture. When the seeds germinate in 7 to 14 days, remove the plastic.





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- ★ Set pots in a sunny window or under fluorescent lights. When seedlings are 1 inch high, thin them to one seedling per pot. The best way to do that is to cut off the unwanted plants with a scissors because pulling the seedlings out will disturb the roots of the remaining plant.
- ★ Keep the mix evenly moist by watering from the bottom, not the top. Set the pots in a pan or sink filled with about an inch of water until moisture appears on the surface.

Growing on in the Garden

- ★ Transplant seedlings started indoors or bought at a garden center on a cloudy, calm day. Set each plant in the ground so the crown is just even with the surface. To prevent the rims of biodegradable pots from drying out and wicking water from the surrounding soil, peel off the top 1 inch of the pots or simply make sure you completely cover the pots with soil.
- ★ Be careful about spacing. Plant far enough apart that the poppies enjoy good air circulation, avoiding the possibility of later problems with disease.
- ★ You do not need to provide poppies with supplemental watering unless the summer is very hot and dry, nor do you need to fertilize.
- ★ To keep all poppies in bloom for a longer time, deadhead spent flowers instead of allowing them to go to seed.
- ★ If you prefer a very neat look in the garden, support taller varieties against wind and strong rain. Use commercial supports or branched twigs from your spring pruning of shrubs and trees.
- ★ In areas where winters tend to be very wet, Icelandic poppies may not survive. They are so easy to grow from seed, however, that many gardeners treat them as annuals.