



## Sow, you'd like some poppies for next year

by Carol Barany

**M**agnificent ornamental  
bark? Striking  
variegated foliage?  
An uncommon perennial sought  
by highly discerning plant  
collectors?

Meh.

For the last two years, all I've  
cared about is growing cut  
flowers.

My friend Nancy and I sell  
home-grown bouquets at a local  
farm store. Going on almost 2  
years, this just might be the most  
fun I've ever had in over 40  
years of gardening.

For a flower farmer, October is a bittersweet month. Warm sunny days mean armloads of flowers to harvest. But it won't be long before Jack Frost puts an end to a season we started preparing for back in March.

I've already pulled the spent zinnias, cosmos, celosia, and amaranth that graced hundreds of the bouquets we made this year. Running the plants over a few times with my mower set on 'mulch' transformed an enormous biomass into small bits and pieces that eventually disappear into the lawn.

With the first killing frost, dahlia tubers will be dug and hauled to the basement for storage. I'll also be dealing with piles and piles of red and gold leaves that will rain down from two towering Silver Maples. I'll run the leaves all over with my mower set on 'bag'. The collected shreds are heaped on the fallow dahlia beds, protecting the soil until the divided tubers are replanted in May.

While I do my share of grumbling and complaining about how much work it all is, I do it year after year. The rhythm and repetition of these simple tasks have become autumn traditions.

For years, bazillions of tiny black seeds from “Angel’s Choir” poppies would self-sow to grace the garden each spring with an extravaganza of effortless bloom. *Papaver rhoeas* is the scarlet poppy of Flanders Field. “Angel’s Choir” is just one strain that’s been hybridized from it. Each year, there were plenty of red singles, plus a few highly prized blooms in shades of pink, coral, orange, dove grey and lavender.

“Lauren’s Grape” and an unnamed bright coral from my friend Diana are two opium poppies (*Papaver somniferum*) I grow that bloom two weeks later than “Angel’s Choir”. Just when we need them most, they provide more flowers for early spring bouquets. (Rumored to be illegal, opium poppies can be grown for garden use in the US).

I almost lost the whole shebang.

Poppy seeds need light to germinate, and when I covered their beds with shredded leaf mulch a few Novembers ago, I had effectively eliminated their return. Since some gardeners consider poppies “one of our better weeds”, it was an easy problem to fix.

Tap-rooted poppies resent transplanting, so each fall I scatter saved seeds where I want them to grow. This can be done anytime between mid-November and March. Most poppy varieties thrive even in poor soil, as long as it’s well-drained. All that’s required is a weed-free and lightly cultivated bed.

Poppy seed is so tiny that mixing seed with sand before sowing gives a more even distribution. About 1/2 teaspoon of seed, the usual content of one seed packet, mixed in 1 cup of sand, will fill a row 6 feet long. Keep in mind that the word “row” is not found in a poppy’s vocabulary. Plants may respect their boundaries the first year, but after that, seeds will germinate wherever the wind carries them.

Because seeds can’t be covered with soil at planting, a gentle overhead watering will settle them in. You can even sow poppies over an early winter’s snow. The action of the melting snow will tuck the seeds into the soil and provide moisture for early spring germination. Larkspur and bachelor’s buttons can handle the same treatment. When the seedlings emerge in the spring, thin them if the plants seem too close, but only if you must. I’ve learned that poppies grow best where Mother Nature plants them.

In their first season, the show may be short of spectacular, so be patient. In the second season, the self-sowing will begin in lavish abandon.

If you do a late-fall or winter planting, you’ll need seeds long before the racks are stocked at your favorite garden store. Consider shopping online at [www.onestoppoppyshoppe.com](http://www.onestoppoppyshoppe.com). Poppy seeds are all they sell, over 75 varieties, all ready to be planted in your Yakima garden.

Poppies are not a long-lasting cut flower. To prolong their life once cut, sear the stem’s end in a hot flame or boiling water for a few seconds to seal the latex sap that leaks from the wounded stem.

They thrive in cool weather. As soon as it heats up, the plants will wither and just beg to be pulled out. Before you do, harvest some seeds, or shake the plants wherever you want poppies to grow next year.

They'll be back.