

A Greener View: Phlox of flowers

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: In the springtime, along the roadside near my house, there were some phlox plants blooming. I kept track of them and now I see they have long seed pods. I collected a few pod's worth of seeds, but I am not sure what to do with them. Do I plant them now or wait until spring?

A: The best thing to do when planting wildflower seeds is to do the same thing that nature is doing with them. Since they are still on the plant along the roadside, you can just store them too. If they drop out of the seed pods in the fall, then plant them this fall. If they stay until spring, then plant them in the spring. If the winter weather is cold and the seeds aren't planted, you will also need to mimic the cold weather by placing the seeds in your refrigerator.

Typically, plants that bloom in the spring will have seeds that have little or no dormancy period and they should be planted immediately after collection to get a full-sized plant before fall. Plants that bloom in the summer or fall will have seeds that require a cold dormancy period before the seeds sprout in the spring.

Now I must also mention that there are about 70 species of phlox in the U.S. Many are rare and found only in a single state, or even in a single valley or specific habitat. If you are collecting such wildflower seeds, you may be getting rare or endangered seeds that are protected by your state's laws; therefore, you may face fines or other penalties for doing this gathering. The same penalties would apply to collecting portions of the plant that you could try propagating.

You may need a special permit to do plant or seed collecting. You should check with your local state extension service office for more information. There are probably local organizations set up to protect the rare plants in your neighborhood; they would appreciate your help locating and propagating them.

The normal garden phlox species of *Phlox divaricata*, *Phlox maculata* and *Phlox paniculata* are all easily found at garden centers. They are all native to the eastern half of the continent and are usually found in wooded areas with moist soil. The original species also tend to have a serious problem with powdery mildew on their leaves, which causes the plants to look rather poor during wet summers or when water gets on the leaves. Newer mildew resistant varieties are available at garden centers for a higher price that is usually worth

the money.

Q: Across my garden and landscape there are yellow leaves falling off my plants. Some are from trees, shrubs and even perennials. What could be affecting so many plants all at once?

A: The answer is your environment. You are probably in a drought stricken area. All of the plants are doing what is normal when the plants are not getting enough water for their needs, which is getting rid of extra leaves. Usually the oldest leaves on the lower part of the plant fall off first. They are the ones that are receiving the most shade from the higher leaves, so they are the most expendable.

There is nothing to worry about, unless some plants are losing too many leaves. Water the ones that appear to be the most in need so they can go into the fall's cooler weather in a healthy manner. Don't fertilize them because that will stimulate growth that can't be sustained.

You should also expect to have a worse fall color than normal. Trees that are stressed will drop many of the leaves before the time for fall color arrives.

Q: My tomatoes are ripening, but many of them have split sides. What is causing this?

A: This is a normal response to a lack of water followed by too much water. As the fruit matures, it develops to a certain size. Many fruits demand a lot of water, so a plant bearing a lot of fruit will let each one grow to a specific size. If additional water is suddenly available, some of the fruit will retain this water and some of the seeds in the fruit will grow larger and more mature; however, the skin can't grow anymore, causing it to crack open.

There is nothing harmful about the fruit until decay organisms take hold, so harvest the fruit as soon as you see the cracks and eat them as usual.

A more consistent watering schedule will help, but sometimes rain provides the extra water and there is nothing you can do about the cracks.

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