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How to Grow Poppies: The Complete Poppy Flower Guide



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Planting, Growing, and Caring for Poppies

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: April 24, 2025



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With their delicate, tissue-like flowers, poppies first bloom at the magical time in midspring when nights are still cool and days are getting warmer. Their iconic, brightly colored petals pop up in gardens with upturned faces, welcoming bees and butterflies. Learn how to plant, grow, and care for poppies.

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All poppies are members of the family *Papaveraceae*, and most of the poppies we grow in our gardens are also included in the genus *Papaver*. The gorgeous blue Himalayan poppy, *Meconopsis betonicifolia*, and California poppies, *Eschscholzia californica*, are exceptions.

BUY SEEDS NOW

The poppy flowers that are familiar to most people have tissue paper-like crinkled blossoms with 4 to 6 brightly-colored petals and a ring of stamens in the center. Their drooping pods and delicate foliage add extra interest to the flower bed from mid-spring through summer.

Available in both single and double blooms, this flower also comes in many colors, including red, white, orange, cream, yellow, blue, and purple.

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Of course, the poppy has long been a symbol of remembrance, dating back to the Egyptians and, of course, the World Wars because it sprang up on the battle-fields after the dead were buried. Some species have also been valued for culinary and medicinal uses since ancient times. Poppies have been featured in poetry and film and painted by several of Europe's most famous artists, including Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh.



Are Poppies Annuals

Poppies can be annuals (dying after one growing season) or perennials (return each year). Many types readily reseed themselves in the garden, coming back on their own to delight you year after year!

How Long Do Poppies Take to Bloom?

After being sown in the spring, annual poppies will bloom during spring and summer following planting. How long they last depends on the variety and weather conditions as many poppies prefer cooler nights.

Perennial (Oriental) poppies started from seeds will not bloom until their second growing season but will then bloom every year. Oriental poppies purchased from a garden center should bloom the same year you plant them.

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Once established, perennial poppies may reliably bloom every year for decades.

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- [How to Grow Verbenas: The Complete Verbena Flower Guide](#)
- [Growing Snapdragons: A Complete Guide](#)
- [How to Grow Baby's Breath: The Complete Baby's Breath Flower Guide](#)

PLANTING

Poppies like sunshine. They are categorized as ‘full sun,’ meaning they like 6 hours or more of bright, direct sunlight.

Choose a site with adequate drainage.

These flowers won’t appreciate a constantly wet or poorly drained site.

Consider creating a raised bed or berm if your soil is heavy and compacted.

Annual poppies can be planted in fall or early spring when there is still frost at night, but the soil is exposed. Planting in fall mimics the natural processes and makes one less thing to do in spring when you are already busy!

Perennial poppy roots are often only available in autumn and should be planted in fall several weeks before the ground freezes.

How to Plant Poppies

Perennial poppies are often purchased as started plants, but annual poppies are easily grown from seeds. Poppy seeds should be cold-stratified for several weeks. They also need light to germinate, so don't bury them in the soil.

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While they do best when direct seeded, they can be transplanted after germination in containers or cells. Use a biodegradable pot and plant the entire thing in the ground—pot, plant and all—to avoid disturbing the roots.

- If direct seeding an area, try mixing one part seed with four or five parts dry sand and then broadcasting across the site to be planted. An old jar with holes poked in the lid can work to sprinkle this mix around.
- Don't cover them up! Poppy seeds need light to germinate. If you are having issues with birds stealing your seeds, try barely covering them with a light, thin layer of straw. Essentially, dust them with bits that float down when you rub the straw together. You still want light getting to the seeds, so don't put it on like mulch.
- After sprinkling the seeds, press them

- Poppies need some cold. If you plant seeds in late spring, give them a chill in the refrigerator for a month to stratify them before planting.
- Poppy roots should be planted with the crowns about 3 inches deep in the fall. They may sprout a little greenery before the winter but then go dormant and return in spring.

GROWING

Growing poppies can be as simple as sprinkling seeds on exposed ground. Follow these tips to enjoy poppies in your own garden and check out this page from Cornell University for [more information on annual poppies](#).

- Poppies seeded directly can be crowded together. If you broadcast seed, chances are you have clumps with too many and bare spots with not enough. Thin the clusters to reduce competition and give them room to grow.

nial plants. Plant them in a location where you can enjoy poppies year after year and not worry about trying to move them.

- Harvesting encourages more flowers. Trim the stems long and use them as cut flowers in the house.
- Remember, if you want them to self-seed for next year, you'll need to leave some flowers to develop into maturity. The seed pods are intriguing and can provide interest and bird-watching opportunities all winter.

Types

With so many varieties, choosing which to plant can be exhausting. Here are a few we like, and if you can't decide, many vendors sell a seed mix.

- Common poppy, also called Flanders, American Legion, or Red corn poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*). This is the famous red flower worn for remembrance in Canada, the United States, the UK, and other countries. Stunning in extensive



Image: Common red poppy. Credit:

Alex Manders/Shutterstock

- ‘Oriental Scarlet’ is a perennial poppy (*P. orientale*) with unique, six-inch diameter orange blooms on strong stems. The foliage will die back in summer, so interplant with other flowers to avoid a bare spot in your garden.

Check out this page from NC State Extension for [more information about Oriental poppies.](#)



Credit: Coulanges/Shutterstock

- ‘Hungarian breadseed’ is an annual with stunning lavender and purple flowers and dark blue or black seeds for baking.



Image: Hungardian Breadseed.

Credit: AnnuO/Shutterstock

- Shirley poppies are direct descendants of the Flanders or common poppy but were bred to provide a mix of pinks, reds, and even an occasional white. Economical to plant en masse, they are annual and self-seeding.



*Image: Shirley poppies. Credit:
Shutterstock.*

HARVESTING

You may have heard (or experienced) that poppies are best appreciated in the garden and wilt within a few hours if cut for a vase. Here's the trick to keeping poppies alive and gorgeous in the house for up to four days.



- Harvest poppies before the flowers are fully opened. Once the buds have begun to spread and the color is revealed, they can be cut.
- Strip any foliage that would be in the vase. Some people remove all leaves.
- Using a lighter, match, or candle, sear the end of the stem until it is blackened; just the tip will do. Poppies exude a white, sappy liquid when cut that will prevent the stem from taking up water. Seal it off, and the flowers will last for several days.
- Arrange them in a vase with clean water and place them in a location out of direct sunlight.
- Unopened flower buds may open in a day or two; if they don't, they still add texture and a fun factor to your bouquet.

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PESTS/DISEASES

Poppies are easy to grow and not often significantly plagued by pests or disease.

A few more common issues include:

- Thrips: can cause leaf stippling, especially on California poppies. Look for small white bugs on the underside of the leaves.
- Aphids: small, green insects that are common garden pests. Check our page on how to control them. If they are on your poppies, they are also attacking other plants in your garden.

water can lead to root rot and eventually kill the plants.

WIT AND WISDOM

- Poppies may have been in cultivation as early as 5000 BCE.
- Red poppies bloomed above WWI graves and battlefields because the soil disturbance exposed dormant seeds to light and allowed them to germinate.

FLOWERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture.

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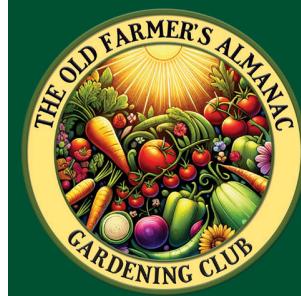


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