

gardening by subtraction with **Self-Sowers**

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY KAREN BUSSOLINI

Whether they bloom briefly or look good year-round, easily removed self-sowing plants play many roles in the garden and can be a boon for the busy gardener.



EVEN AS A kid I never understood why Grumple Eddy, my crabby old uncle, cursed the Johnny jump-ups (*Viola tricolor*) that popped up in his garden each spring, going after them with a hoe and a scowl. Not only did I love their cheerful purple-and-yellow faces, but because they self-seeded with abandon, they had a delightful penchant for appearing in unexpected places.

Unlike my uncle, I welcome plants that sow themselves in my garden, where they create random jazzy combinations and make themselves at home in places I would never have considered. Self-sown plants also save me from having to buy and replant my tried-and-true garden favorites each year. Instead, I practice gardening by subtraction—that is, I simply remove the plants where they are not wanted.

This lower-maintenance technique offers many advantages: Self-sown plants establish faster and have a greater success

Above: Brown-eyed Susans fill the gaps in the author's garden with splashes of sunny color.
Top right: Johnny jump-ups appear among the leaves of 'Sapphire' blue oat grass.

rate than transplants. Also, some seeds sprout in fall or require a cold period in order to germinate, and this is easier to accomplish naturally outdoors than buried in the freezer under last summer's pesto. And allowing plants to set seeds also provides a food source for wildlife and encourages genetic diversity.

SEEDS TO HAVE—AND HAVE NOT

When it comes to which plants make the best self-seeders in a garden, trial and error are the best guides. You want plants to be not too big or too small for your space, and they should be easy to remove without digging. They should be pleasing in form and color, reliably show up when they're needed, set the right amount of seed, and disperse it without much fuss.

A handful—including Johnny jump-ups—have qualities that make them welcome wherever they appear in my garden. Other self-seeders—like *Corydalis lutea*, which has ferny leaves that provide multi-seasonal appeal—need to be kept in bounds, but their redeeming qualities justify the special attention. Teasing tiny seedlings from the crowns of neighboring perennials, then a thorough pulling and cutting back in summer keeps them under control.

Tap-rooted plants, in particular, should be thinned when small. I had an eight-foot-tall bronze fennel growing in an undesired location that took a three-foot-deep excavation and a pot of boiling water to finish off. Now I make sure to pull the volunteer seedlings when they're small and harvest more seeds for cooking.

Keep in mind that seeds of some hybrid plants may not produce plants that look like their parents, or the seeds may be sterile. Also, some plants are notorious for cross-pollinating with each other, resulting in seeds that produce very different-looking plants. After several years, the original plants will have disappeared, leaving behind an assortment of seedlings with motley traits. Diligent monitoring of plants before they form seeds may be the only way to preserve the original traits. However, allowing nature a free hand may both save effort and yield delightful variations.

BEWARE SPLIT PERSONALITIES

Some plants have a two-faced nature depending on where they are grown, so gar-

deners need to do their homework before introducing any plant into their gardens that may have a broader negative environmental impact.

For example, Japanese primrose (*Primula japonica*) is one of those self-seeding plants that can be a dream—or a nightmare. This robust wetland plant features basal leaves that emerge in April, develops eight- to nine-inch-long leaves from a central crown topped by tall-stemmed clusters of red, pink, or white flowers, and remains attractive throughout the growing season.

At the Vermont farm of landscape designers and authors Gordon and Mary

time, a dozen plants originally situated in a wet, shady trial garden adjacent to a stream have multiplied into thousands, escaping the garden and establishing themselves across the road and into natural areas. Five years after a regime of herbicides and handweeding, Cary Institute staff still pull 100 to 200 primrose seedlings a year. Planted near water that connects with a natural freshwater source, Japanese primroses are highly invasive, outcompeting and displacing native plants.

Other popular plants that are potentially invasive and banned in certain states include water forget-me-nots (*Myosotis*



Located away from a natural watercourse, this moist garden in Maine is suitable for cultivating Japanese primroses, which spread happily among other woodland plants.

Hayward, seeds from Gordon's 87-year-old garden mentor Howard Andros were scratched into moist soil under a grove of wild plums in 1984. Japanese primroses have bloomed every spring since under a canopy of fragrant white plum blossoms and now also cover the northern half of the garden. The Haywards encourage the spread of deep pink- and red-flowered plants by removing the seedheads of lighter colored flowers.

At the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook, New York, Japanese primroses are not so well-behaved. Judy Sullivan, who spent years there developing habitat gardens, relates that in over 15 years'

scorpioides), cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*), yellow flag (*Iris pseudacorus*), dame's rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*), and bachelor's buttons (*Centaurea cyanus*).

To find out what plants are listed as invasive in your state, check the State Noxious Weed Lists at <http://plants.usda.gov/java/noxiousDriver#state>.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

When gardening by subtraction, there's a colorful palette of self-sowing plants that can yield pleasing, spontaneous displays. It has been interesting comparing notes with gardeners in other parts of the country, many of whom grow the same

plants with different results due to regional climate, soil type, aesthetic preferences, and other factors.

The following are a few favorite self-seeders that have grown well for me in Connecticut, as well as for fellow gardeners across the country. (See the sidebar on page 23 for recommended self-seeders for specific regions.)

PERENNIAL FAVORITES

Brown-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia triloba*)

Many plants don't survive in my Darwinian garden, where competition is stiff and the only water they get comes from rainfall. One that performs like a star under these trying conditions is brown-eyed Susan, a native of eastern and central North America with a lyrically airy habit.

Small first-year rosettes form almost a groundcover in spots, holding soil, contributing a green presence, and suppressing weeds. First- and second-year plants are easy to pull. Cutting back in early summer encourages a more compact form with many flowers. For a tall narrow form, thin entire stems. A final thinning at bloom time refines the composition and fills the vase. Adaptable to both sun and shade, brown-eyed Susan blooms in August, providing a big shot of color for six weeks or more. Golden one-and-a-half to two-inch daisylike flowers are touched with white as they age, and their seeds feed hungry birds such as goldfinches all winter.

Great Blue Lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*)

Another native to eastern and central North America, this plant thrives in wet sites. In August, the lobelias' long-lasting spires of intense cobalt-blue tubular flowers shoot up above the strappy golden blades of Japanese sweet flag (*Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon'), creating a vibrant vision of blue and yellow in my garden. Great blue lobelia needs disturbed soil to colonize. Individuals may not live long, but if you stir up the soil, harvest ripe flower stalks, and shake their seeds over the area, the plant will spread over time.

For me, the shallow-rooted seedlings are never too numerous.

Wild Phlox (*Phlox divaricata*)

After seeing Gordon and Mary Hayward's one-and-a-half-acre Vermont garden, I'll never deadhead wild phlox again. Native to the woodlands and fields of the eastern half of North America, this perennial produces masses of fragrant lavender to pink flowers in spring. The Haywards started with 16 plants in a dry woodland garden; now wild phlox carpets a 30-foot-by-70-

foot area. Although wild phlox does spread by rooting along its creeping stems, Gordon assists the process by removing spent flowers with a string trimmer to strew ripe seeds about.

Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla* spp.)

Gardeners coast to coast like lady's mantle for its neat clumps of wavy-edged rounded leaves emerging in early spring to charmingly catch the sparkling dew, followed by loose cymes of small chartreuse flowers that last for several weeks. Plants



Above: Chartreuse-flowering lady's mantle stands out on top of a wall. **Left:** Self-sown great blue lobelia flowers rise above the fine foliage of Japanese sweet flag in the author's Connecticut garden.



work in formal or informal settings, and are especially good for transitioning from full baking sun to part shade. They look good even while going to seed. Self-sown seedlings come up equally well in garden beds and between pavers.

Lungworts (*Pulmonaria* spp.)

Because lungworts have a reputation for cross-pollinating and producing seeds of plants with unpredictable traits, I used to dutifully label and deadhead all the fancy new selections with superior foliage and

Sources

Bustani Plant Farm, Stillwater, OK.
(405) 372-3379.

www.bustaniplantfarm.com.

High Country Gardens,
Santa Fe, NM. (800) 925-9387.
www.highcountrygardens.com.

Johnny's Selected Seeds, Winslow,
ME. (877) 564-6697.
www.johnnyseeds.com.

Munchkin Nursery & Gardens, De-
pauw, IN. (812) 633-4858.
www.munchkinnursery.com.

Prairie Moon Nursery, Winona, MN.
(507) 452-1362.
www.prairiemoonnursery.com.

flowers that I introduced to my garden. I must have missed some because—to my delight—assorted lungworts now emerge the instant snow melts. I have seen many striking silver variations, plants with dark crisply dotted leaves and huge purple-blue flowers hinting of the cultivar 'Blue Ensign' in their family history, and a few with pure white blooms. They nestle into pockets in mossy boulders with wild Christmas ferns and poke up through mats of *Phlox stolonifera*. I compost the wimpy seedlings and let the best do their thing.

Hellebores (*Helleborus* spp.)

Besides boxwood, hellebores are the only dark green presence in my winter garden that deer don't devour. The finely-cut chartreuse leaves of stinking hellebores (*Helleborus foetidus*) emerge in December and blossoms of the same shade open in February. In late spring, I cut back rangy old plants and let younger ones take over. I also remove seedlings that stray beyond the garden's boundaries.

Virginia Bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*)

Despite the fact that they die back to the ground by early summer, Virginia bluebells are perfect for naturalizing in wooded areas. Small rounded leaves tinged a dusky purple emerge with the early spring bulbs. "The next thing you notice," says garden writer Carole Ottesen, who has Virginia bluebells popping up everywhere in her Maryland garden, "is they turn a remarkable pale green color, and then—all of a sudden—the plants are in bloom."

ENCOURAGING ANNUALS AND TENDER PERENNIALS TO SELF-SOW

For years I never understood why spider flower (*Cleome hassleriana*), California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*), flowering tobacco (*Nicotiana* spp.), sweet alyssum (*Loxularia maritima*), and countless classic grown-as-annual self-sowers flourished for gardeners everywhere but failed to reproduce in my Connecticut garden. Sometimes at summer's end a seedling would appear in the middle of a stone path or my front steps, too late to set seed.



Spider flower is a prolific self-seeder.

On one late summer visit to Bob Hyland and Andrew Beckman's Loomis Creek Nursery in Hudson, New York, I noticed a gorgeous jewel of Opar (*Talinum paniculatum* 'Kingswood Gold')—the same plant that was just then flowering in my home garden—was here already spilling seed everywhere by a gravel parking area. I wondered aloud at the difference, and Bob said, "Oh, everything seeds in gravel." (For a list of his top picks for the gravelly edges of walkways, see the sidebar on page 23.)

It turns out the soil conditions in my garden were not conducive to encouraging proper germination for the seeds of some plants.

I'd already noticed that many native plants readily germinate in moss and learned from Pennsylvania landscape designer Larry Weaner that others only proliferate in disturbed soil or gravel. Ian Caton, a horticulturist who works with Weaner, adds that plants with small seeds that need light to germinate require thin substrates free of leaf litter. Because my garden is covered with mulch and disturbed only by careless footsteps on stepping stones or is shaded by plants that stabilize steep slopes, these seeds don't have what they need to germinate. Although I don't have this option, gardeners on flatter ground could forgo mulch or try mulching with sand or fine gravel, making sure to pull weeds that appear to create disturbance and reduce competition for the seedlings of the desired plants.

Furthermore, most of the annuals and tender perennials we grow come from South and Central America, Mediterranean areas, or Africa. In northern climes, they need the heat absorbed and radiated by stone to get going. The soil in my garden just takes too long to warm up. Northern gardeners will have better luck with warm-climate plants with gravel mulch, at the edge of gravel paths, between stones or dry-laid bricks in areas that get full sun. I have my eye on cracks in the southwest-facing driveway that sprout heat-loving weeds and an occasional seedling from last year's containers. A little pickaxe work to enlarge cracks where nobody drives and some fine gravel might work wonders.

—K.B.

The small blue or blue-pink, bell-shaped flowers of this North American woodland native last several weeks, after which time the plants begin to go dormant—not a pretty sight. Plants grow two feet tall and a foot wide and produce zillions of seeds. Taking a cue from the cycle of growth in its natural habitat, Ottesen plants ferns and tall perennials that emerge as the Virginia bluebells' decline, engulfing the mess. She controls the spread of the bluebells by pulling out most of their seedlings.

Euphorbias (*Euphorbia* spp.)

There are over 2,000 species in the genus *Euphorbia*; some are noxious weeds, others are well-behaved, self-perpetuating garden citizens in the right conditions. Nan Serman, a low-water gardening expert, author, and designer in Encinitas, California, grows *Euphorbia rigida*, a fleshy blue-green-leaved evergreen sprawler, and *E. characias* ssp. *wulfenii*, a taller, more shrub-like plant with chartreuse flowers and contrasting deep green foliage in her small



front yard. From a handful of each, she now has dozens, thanks to self-sowing. “They went from being a little feature in the garden to being the background,” says Sterman. “They’re like a carpet and everything else is like rose petals sprinkled across the carpet.” She also notes that the foliage is fabulous from the end of May until December, when flowering begins. The seedlings are easy enough to pull, but it’s a good idea to wear gloves and cover arms and legs when weeding or deadheading to protect skin from the caustic milky sap.

Golden Lace (*Patrinia scabiosifolia*)

Despite its see-through, open framework, golden lace still packs a punch. Roger Gossler, of Gossler Farms Nursery in Springfield, Oregon, says “you can plant all kinds of things behind it and still see them.” Compact basal foliage keeps its good looks all season and turns dusky purple in fall. Seven-foot-tall, red-tinted stems bear large panicles of long-lasting mustard-yellow flowers. “We’ve had it for 25 years. Seedlings move around but stay within about a 30-by-150-foot space, and unwanted plants are very easy to pull out,” says Gossler. “They give great late-season color when a lot of things are quiet after the big flush of summer color.”

Beardtongues (*Penstemon* spp.)

Denver Botanic Gardens’ Water-Smart Garden bursts with colorful flowering plants that require poor, dry, gravelly soil. Panayoti Kelaidis, director of outreach and senior curator, highly recommends beardtongues—especially desert beardtongue (*Penstemon pseudospectabilis*) and scarlet bugler (*P. barbatus*). Both are native to the southwest and attract hummingbirds. Desert beardtongue grows to three feet tall and produces spikes of tubular red flowers above large, toothed, gray-green leaves. Growing two to three feet tall, scarlet bugler’s tubular red flowers feature yellow hairs on the lower lip.

Jewels of Opar (*Talinum paniculatum*)

Mississippi horticulturist Felder Rushing, co-author of *Passalong Plants*, is a fan of easy-to-grow, old-fashioned, plain green jewels of Opar. This two-foot-tall, fleshy-leaved relative of portulaca produces airy sprays of pink flowers resembling baby’s breath. “It’s a



Top: *Euphorbia rigida* softens the edges of a walkway in Nan Sterman’s California garden. **Above:** At Denver Botanic Gardens, red-flowering desert beardtongue and scarlet bugler share a bed with a variety of colorful, drought-tolerant plants in the Water-Smart Garden.

FAVORITE SELF-SOWERS FOR EVERY REGION

I asked garden experts from different parts of the country to recommend self-sowing plants that are particularly suited to their regions, and here are their favorites. —K.B.

SOUTH CENTRAL

Steve Owens, owner of Bustani Plant Farm in Stillwater, Oklahoma, suggests:

Ceratotheca triloba
(South African foxglove)
Collinsia violacea (blue-eyed Mary)
Delphinium carolinianum
(Carolina larkspur)
Euphorbia marginata, syn. *E. variegata*
(snow on the mountain)
Gaillardia aestivalis var. *flavovirens*
(prairie gaillardia, blanket flower)
Tetragonotheca ludoviciana
(Louisiana nerveray)
Thymophylla tenuiloba, syn. *Dyssodia tenuiloba* (Dahlberg daisy)
Verbena bonariensis (Brazilian verbena)

MOUNTAINS/SOUTHWEST

Panayoti Kelaidis, director of outreach and senior curator at the Denver Botanic Gardens recommends:

Aquilegia chrysantha (yellow columbine)
Bukiniczia cabulica (variegated statice)
Collomia grandiflora (grand collomia)
Eremurus spp. (desert candle, foxtail lily)
Eschscholzia californica
(California poppy)
Eriogonum umbellatum
(sulphur-flower buckwheat)
Penstemon barbatus (scarlet bugler),
P. pseudospectabilis (desert beard-tongue),
P. strictus (Rocky Mountain penstemon, stiff beard-tongue)
Phacelia campanularia
(California bluebell)
Salvia x sylvestris, syn. *S. deserta*

(woodland sage), *S. transylvanica*
(Transylvanian sage)
Verbascum bombyciferum, syn.
V. broussa (Turkish mullein),
V. roripifolium (roripa mullein)

NORTHEAST

Bob Hyland, owner of Loomis Creek Nursery in Hudson, New York, recommends these plants for the gravelly, edgy transitions from paths/walkways to garden beds:

Amaranthus cruentus 'Hot Biscuits'
Digitalis grandiflora, syn. *D. ambigua*
(yellow foxglove), *D. lutea* (small yellow foxglove)
Eschscholzia californica
(California poppy)
Impatiens glandulifera
(Himalayan balsam)
Linum perenne (blue flax)
Nigella damascena (love-in-a-mist)
Papaver atlanticum (Atlas or Atlantic poppy)
Salvia argentea (silver sage), *S. pratensis*
(meadow clary)
Verbascum chaixii (nettle-leaved mullein)

DEEP SOUTH

Some favorite reseederers of Mississippi horticulturist and author Felder Rushing are:

Celosia cristata (cockscorn)
Cleome hassleriana (spider flower)
Cosmos bipinnatus (cosmos),
C. sulphureus (orange cosmos)
Consolida ajacis (larkspur)
Coreopsis tinctoria (Plains coreopsis)
Gomphrena globosa (globe amaranth)

Mirabilis jalapa (four o'clock)
Perilla frutescens and *P. frutescens*
'Atropurpurea' (beefsteak plant, shiso)
Zinnia elegans (zinnia)

CALIFORNIA

Landscaper designer and author Nan Sterman of Encinitas, California, likes:

Clarkia spp.
Eschscholzia californica
(California poppy)
Hunnemannia fumariifolia (Mexican tulip poppy)
Lathyrus odoratus (sweet pea)
Papaver somniferum (bread seed poppy)

MIDWEST

Gene E. Bush, owner of Munchkin Nursery & Gardens, LLC, in Depauw, Indiana, offers the following top reseederers for Midwestern shade gardens:

Actaea americana, syn. *Cimicifuga americana* (American bugbane)
Arisaema triphyllum (Jack-in-the-pulpit),
A. dracontium (dragon root)
Asarum canadense (Canadian ginger)
Athyrium niponicum (Japanese painted fern)
Corydalis spp.
Delphinium exaltatum (tall larkspur),
D. tricornis (dwarf larkspur)
Geranium maculatum (spotted geranium), *G. phaeum* 'Samobor'
(mourning widow geranium)
Helleborus foetidus (stinking hellebore)
Spigelia marilandica (Indian pink)
Stylophorum diphyllum (wood poppy)


great texture plant for pots and shaded borders," says Rushing. "I've never seen a single insect or disease on it, and it needs little or no water."

Less familiar native large-flowered rock pink (*T. calycinum*) is listed as rare and endangered at its extreme northeastern range in Illinois. But Steve Owens, owner of Bustani Plant Farm in Stillwater, Oklahoma, describes it as easy to grow and heat tolerant. "It's very short, four inches if it's

standing on its toes, with flowers taller," he says. "In Oklahoma, it blooms around 4 to 5 p.m., so it greets you at the end of the work day." In the wild, it grows in sandy, shallow soil over rock, so Owen uses it in raised beds and rock walls where there's good drainage.

LESS CONTROL, MORE ENJOYMENT

Self-sowing plants are for observant people who are open to change. Those who

simply dump a thick layer of mulch and walk away miss all the fun. All you need to do is learn to recognize the seedlings, which often look very different from mature plants, give them some space, then see what beautiful surprises pop up in your garden. 

Karen Bussolini is a photographer, freelance writer, and garden coach based in South Kent, Connecticut.