

In the winter of 2019, we started getting some strange looks around the school farm at Charlottesville High School. My students and I are always looking for fun projects to experiment with new ideas, but this one took a while to come together and didn't exactly look very pretty at the beginning. Between the building and the farm were several islands of grass sandwiched in between sidewalks.



These patches of weedy grass did nothing to beautify the landscape and created more work for the landscaping crew to cut, which in turn leads to the use of more gas and oil in their equipment. Small gas-powered engines like the ones those string trimmers used to cut those patches of grass are loud, smelly, and create quite a large portion of the greenhouse gasses emitted in the US every year.

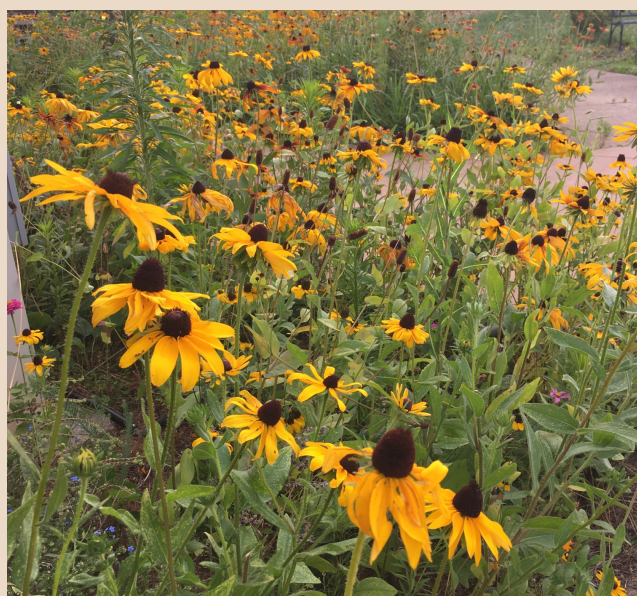
So we figured that if we could find a way to reduce the fossil fuels required to maintain that space and at the same time beautify the space, we should just do it! Enter the wildflowers.

This is where we had to make things ugly to make it beautiful. We started in the winter by covering all of the areas with heavy, black tarps to completely kill all the grass and weeds.





This is the crucial first step as weeds competing with your flower seeds will likely win out in the end! This solarizing can go quite quickly in the warmer months, but since we started in the winter, it took about two months and even then, we had to do a good bit of digging and raking to get it all cleaned out. We finished the prep by adding a thin layer of compost over the soil. The great thing about wildflowers is that if you choose a mix that works for your climate, they don't need amazing soil to grow!



The next step is choosing the best quality wildflower seeds as possible. The seed mixes sold at big box stores are often full of filler and do not have great germination rates with the seeds that are included. We ordered a mix of annuals and perennials from a reputable company and were very pleased. The annual flowers gave us a great show the first year, and now we get to enjoy all of the coneflowers, blanket flowers, poppies, and other perennials that will keep coming back year after year.

Scattering the seeds and watering were the favorite steps for the students and everyone was thrilled when the first seedlings emerged. Ron Finely, an urban gardening activist in Los Angeles, often talks about how planting gardens changes the ecosystem. And he says that since we are part of the ecosystem, the garden also changes us. These wildflower plantings are evidence of this theory because we now have a non stop parade of butterflies, bees, hummingbirds, and songbirds visiting the flowers. These flowers also brighten the day of the school community as people come and go past the farm—everyone from students to teachers to neighborhood dog walkers. Everyone can enjoy and be changed by the beauty of these flowers.