

Norms' Notes

Two Great Seeded Flowers to Consider

Not often seen, but excellent in Montana gardens, are the two following flowering plants easily started from seed. Unfortunately, the seed of these two plants for the last few years has been hard to find. Oddly enough both plants simply fell out of fashion. After all, the seed was common twenty years ago. Both plants are annuals needing to be seeded every year. Also, both plants need at least 6 hours of sun on cloudless days and prefer a fertile, loose and well drained soil.



The first is *Xeranthemum annuum*, a clear lavender or white strawflower that blooms in the late summer when there is often a lull in garden color. While there are many so called "strawflowers," or "immortelles" that are offered, *Xeranthemum* is one of the best of them for a Montana climate simply because it is the earliest annual strawflower to both mature and set seed before the end of a growing season. The flowers look somewhat like daisies, having 1 inch ray flowers. In cool Montana the plants are commonly only 15-20 inches tall. The dried flowers that are lavender hold their color in moderate light for a year with hardly any special drying process other than cutting the stems at full bloom and allowing the flowers to dry on a floor, or in an open box. The flowers that are white hold their dried color indefinitely. The seed of *Xeranthemum* should be set out and barely covered with soil two weeks before the last expected spring frost. The surface soil must be kept moist until the seedlings emerge...about 3 weeks. Ideally the plants prefer 6 inch spacing, though they will tolerate closer crowding. They bloom for a comparatively long six weeks. Do collect mature seed in the fall since most seed will not survive a Montana winter.

Another especially delightful plant is variously called either *Silene occulata* or *Viscaria occulata*, and with one common name being "rose angel". *Silene* is a genus closely related to *Viscaria* and *Lychnis*. Together these three genera offer a wide number of both perennial and annual species that do well in Montana. Check them out. But especially beautiful and overlooked is *Silene occulata* whose flowers look like pink or sometimes red flax. Indeed, many confuse this flower with flax. The plant in Montana only grows to a 6 to 9 inch height. For years the pink variety of this *Silene* was offered by Wildseed Farms, but they almost lost their seed crop in 2003. Thus this year they did not offer the seed by catalog, but only in their Texas retail store. Fortunately, Thompson and Morgan offers the harder to find red blooming variety of the plant called: *Silene occulata cardinalis*. It's gorgeous. It should be seeded as soon as the ground can be worked ... generally late March or early April in Montana because it needs as much growing time in Montana to both bloom and still set seed. The seed should be barely covered and kept moist until the seedlings emerge ... about 4 weeks. The plants prefer 5 inch spacing, but they, like the above *xeranthemum*, will kindly tolerate crowding. The flowers bloom for a 6-8 week period beginning in mid-summer. The seed of this *Silene* must also be collected in the fall since it too will not survive a Montana winter.

Seed sources: *Xeranthemum annuum*, Seed Savers Exchange, 2004 (Your club president should have received a 2003 copy at Fall Board), page 65, Item # 1134, 500 seeds for \$2.50. Phone: 563-382-5990 or www.seedsavers.org.

Silene occulata cardinalis, Thompson and Morgan, 2004, page 133, Item #7058, 500 seeds for \$2.99. Phone 1-800-274-7333 or www.thompson-morgan.com.