

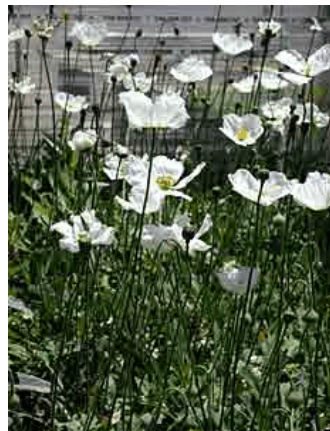
POPPY CULTIVARS

By Norman DeNeal

“Cultivar” is simply a shorthand word for “cultivated variety”. And with regard to poppies there are many cultivars. Poppies belong to a genus called *Papavar* of which there are about 70 species, most having originated in Europe and Asia, though some have their ancestral home in North America and other parts of the planet. Fortunately, for our purposes, most poppies are easy to cultivate, and for Montana’s climates hardy enough to thrive. Partly because of the moderately large number of species of poppies several cultivars have been developed, though only those readily available will be listed here.

There are only two perennial species worth considering. The most widely known is the oriental poppy, *Papaver orientale*. The common species has a single bright orange flower up to 8 inches across, and a mature plant will produce about 30 flowers in late spring to early summer. This hardy zone 3 plant will take about 4 years to mature from a seed and does best in rich, well-drained soil that is 12 inches deep, though a 6-8 inch depth is acceptable. They produce thick, fleshy, and rather deep, brittle roots. All foliage dies back in mid to late summer, reappears in the fall, and of course again in the spring. The common, almost harsh, orange color is quite acceptable in large groupings, though when placed with simultaneously blooming blue and purple flowers is awkwardly out of place. Fortunately, the oriental poppy cultivars solve the problem by blooming in soft pinks, salmon, red or white. Additionally, the cultivars can also flower as doubles, bi-colors, ruffled or fringed blossoms. Nearly all can be grown as easily as the species single orange. They will even tolerate drought and the encroachment of grasses and weeds since the root level of the poppies grow below the level of invasive neighbors. Their disadvantage is two-fold: a short 2-3 week blooming period, and the unattractive foliage in mid to late summer. Though easily started from seed, importantly, the cultivars only come true from root cuttings. To propagate root cuttings, simply dig up a mature plant and break up the roots to at least the length and diameter of a new pencil. Ideally, dip the root in a rooting and fungicide powder, plant vertically in the soil, and generously water until leaf growth appears. Propagation from seed usually results in a reversal to the common species orange flowers.

A second perennial poppy cultivar is *Papaver anomalum album*. This white, rare flower variety differs from the common orange flowering species, and looks deceptively like a white Iceland poppy. But unlike the Iceland poppy, it blooms over a longer period (late spring to late summer) and prefers full sun. It resents being transplanted, though young seedlings will take a transplant if the soil around the delicate roots is not disturbed. It is a short-lived perennial blooming in its second year and usually lives for three years. A single plant can produce 50-80 flowers through the blooming season. Seed will not generally survive a Montana winter and must be collected to be planted in the spring or summer.



The one biennial poppy cultivar to be considered is the Iceland poppy, *Papaver croceum* sny. *nudicale*. Ordinarily, this plant blooms in orange, yellow or white. However, the cultivars flower in salmon, almost true pink, peach, soft pastel orange and yellow, almost true red, and in bi-colors. Because of poor seed germination rate, many people prefer buying the plants already started in a nursery. Nevertheless, if you collect a generous amount of seed, do start your own in the late spring. But be forewarned that the cultivars, if grown next to the common orange, yellow or white species will revert to common colors. Iceland poppies thrive in partial shade. They resent transplanting except when young; broken roots "bleed", often killing the plant.

Four annual species of poppy cultivars are worthy of mention. Shirley poppies, *Papaver rhoas*, commonly bloom in red, pink, salmon or white, and not uncommonly as bi-colors. The cultivars, however, also bloom as doubles, and in colors of peach, pastels, what appears as dusty lavender, and in unusual bi-colors. Notable is a cultivar variety called "Mother of Pearl". The seed germination rate for cultivars is often only moderate compared to the high germination rate of the common species. Furthermore, for the cultivars to remain true, they must be isolated by distance from their common relatives. You, too, can generate your own cultivars by year after year selecting seed from outstanding or unusual plants. Though the plants will self-seed without human intervention, it is best to collect and thinly spread and barely cover the seed in early spring. Mature crowded plants can never become more than spindly unremarkable plants. Thin, if necessary, when the seedlings are quite young.

The next three cultivar species are so similar in structure, height, and flower appearance that they will be mentioned together. They are: *Papaver somniferum*, *Papaver paeoniflorum*, and *Papaver laciniatum*. Ordinarily they bloom as single, with the common *P. somniferum* species being a single true lavender flower. The cultivars are all doubles. *P. laciniatum* has up to 5 inch diameter double fringed flowers in red, lavender, white, pink and now even a newly introduced orange. *P. somniferum* and *P. paeoniflorum* bloom in all of the above colors, except orange, and with the addition of maroon and bi-colored blossoms. They too are spectacular 5 inch diameter flowers. However, all these cultivars only bloom 2 to 3 weeks. Thus, successive seedings are needed to extend the blooming period over a longer time. Again, as with Shirley poppies, these 24 to 30 inch tall plants should be thinned as young seedlings if they are not to be tall and lanky plants. Given about 8 inches of space between plants, they will branch and bloom over a longer period with more flowers per plant. Single flowers often appear among the doubles, and they should be uprooted so as not to cross-pollinate with the doubles. Prodigious seed producers, the seed should be collected in the fall since harsh Montana winters will kill almost all seed fallen to the ground.

A few general notes on all poppies. Except for oriental poppies, you should have at least 5 inches of well-drained fertile soil. When seeding spread the seed very thinly, covering with a thin (about 1/8") layer of soil. Importantly, keep the soil moist at all times until the seeds germinate. Even with half a day of dry soil, you can lose germinating seed. Though all varieties are sporadically available in various seed catalogs, Thompson and Morgan (1-800-274-7333) carries the seed of every cultivar mentioned here with the exception of oriental poppy cultivars which are most successfully purchased as root cuttings.