

The following article on "Poppies" appeared in the Spring, 2007 issue of the *Montana Gardens*. If you have already read it, then skip on to the pictures and further comments.

Norm's Notes
POPPIES THAT POP

For sheer flamboyance, length of the blooming period, or saturation of garden color, poppies are often a first choice for Montana gardeners. The problem though is that no single poppy species fills all the above three qualities. Flamboyance may be best assigned to the **oriental poppy** (*Papaver orientalis*) cultivars. Most are familiar with the late spring-blooming 5 inch, 4 petaled orange flowers. But some consider the shocking orange to be a bit much ... garish they say. That esthetic is especially apparent when the orange is mixed in with purple and blue flowers. Prized for their huge flowers, hardiness, and the long life of the plants, British hybridizers first beat the orange rap with a single plant that was pink. Cursed by the owner of the garden, a more astute nurseryman coveted the plant, and rightly so. From that one plant came a profusion of other pinks, then white, and finally came a torrent of cultivars in the last 15 years in colors of various reds, salmon, plums and lavenders. Furthermore, there emerged double flowers, some with ruffles, and others with fringed petals, and even some bicolored flowers. When the plants are mature and blooming, they are the most extravagant of Montana prima donnas. But all flowering plants have disadvantages. For oriental poppies it is the brief flush of bloom ... only 10-14 days. Also, rain can easily make the large flowers look like a prom dress straight out of a bathroom shower. Then there's the foliage that dies back in mid-summer leaving a spot that should be filled in with later maturing plants that can screen the bare space. Lastly, with a few exceptions, the oriental poppy cultivars do not come true from seed. Any offspring resembling the parent are propagated from the root cuttings of a mature parent plant. Still, the exuberance of oriental poppies offsets the disadvantages. Especially desirable varieties are "Watermelon" for its unusually clear pink with a hint of red and the bicolored red and white "Place Pigalle". "Patty's Plum" though is a rather bland dusty purple, fine if you like that color. "Cedric Morris" sometimes called "Cedric's Pink" too is rather bland ... a grey-pink. Otherwise, consider any of the other cultivars you may find.

Iceland poppies (*Papaver nudicaule*) are common plants and uncommonly long bloomers especially if deadheaded. Having their most prolific flush of flowers in mid spring, they continue on through September. Considered biennials, they self seed, so that seedlings from the current year's flowers will bloom the following year. Bearing flowers in orange, yellow, or white, cultivars are also available in light pink, cream, and as bicolors. However, the latter generally do not come true from seed. Icelands prefer the cool summers of our western mountains, and they do well either in full sun or shade. Their only disadvantage is that sometimes they can over seed, but the seedlings can take a transplant especially in the early spring for spreading out around your landscape.

For dense color saturation **Shirley poppies** (*Papaver rhoeas*) are your candidate. A single plant commonly will bloom for 5-6 weeks producing over 100 blossoms. Typically though, gardeners have the plants too close together. In relatively good soil the plants should be 9-12 inches apart. And this thinning must be done before the young plants touch each other. Red is the original species color. That changed in about 1910 when pink and white were developed. Today with orange, salmon, dusty lavender, and double and bicolored flowers, the color range is wide and bright. Because Shirley poppies over seed, pull the annual plants before they set seed, and you should still have plenty of self seeded plants for the following year. If you do collect seed, never collect seed from the red flowers since you will always end up with some of the dominant genetic red.

California poppies (*Eschscholtzia californica*) typically are orange with a hint of cream. They bloom for two months. Beginning in mid-summer, they bloom for a month, then stop for about 5 weeks, and continue on without deadheading from September onwards. Though there are yellow, pink, cream, white, and dusty purple varieties, they are not as floriferous as the common orange. Collect the seed when the long seed pods begin to split. Place the pods in an open container where they will continue to open to expose all the seed.

Lastly, there is the **opium** group of poppies, (*Papaver somniferum*). Though legally unavailable in the United States for about 14 years some gardeners still maintain the species and will share seed. Typically they are a clear lavender color. However, the opium poppy is a closely related species to *Papaver laciniatum* and *Papaver peoniflorum*. And these two sub-species are commonly available. The color range is the same as for Shirley poppies with the addition of lavender and maroon. Garden cultivars often have 3-4 inch fully double flowers with fringed petals (*laciniatum*) or ruffled petals (*peoniflorum*). They neither bloom for longer than about 3-4 weeks, nor produce more than about 5-15 flowers per plant. Nevertheless, especially with the double flowered varieties, the blossoms are extravagant. The ripe seed, which contains opium, is pleasant eaten alone or used in poppy seed recipes.

Oriental Poppies



“Little dancing girl” an example of a clear pink with a touch of salmon.



“Watermelon” is probably the most clear, true salmon colored poppy. Striking, especially when light passes through the petals.

The choice of varieties of oriental poppies is presently quite extensive. And though cultivars sometimes are less hardy than their species parents, oriental poppy cultivated varieties are just about as hardy as the orange parents. Nevertheless, seed from the varieties hardly ever come “true”. Thus propagation for the home gardener is done through root cuttings taken in mid-summer when the plants are dormant. Though it is commonly stated that oriental poppy root cutting should be about pencil thickness and length, smaller cuttings are often more successful. Three to five inch cuttings are adequate. Rooting hormone, though helpful, is not necessary. More important is a fungicide in the soil and on the surface. A sand or vermiculite surface helps with fungus problems. Moisten the rooting medium, and keep moist until shoots emerge in the fall. Shoots will emerge before a strong root system develops, so be sure that a good root system has developed before you put the plants in the garden.

“Flamenco dancer” is red with a light touch of orange. Note the fringed petals.



“Fornsett summer” one of several fringed salmon poppies.





“Patty’s Plum” a dusty light maroon, lovely if you like the understated color. Presently popular and was the forerunner of subsequent lavenders. Often the color is overstated in catalogs to be a more clear lavender.

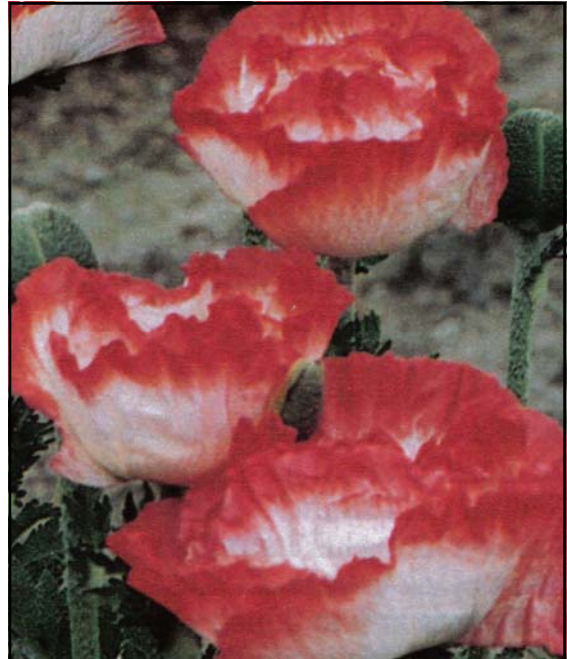


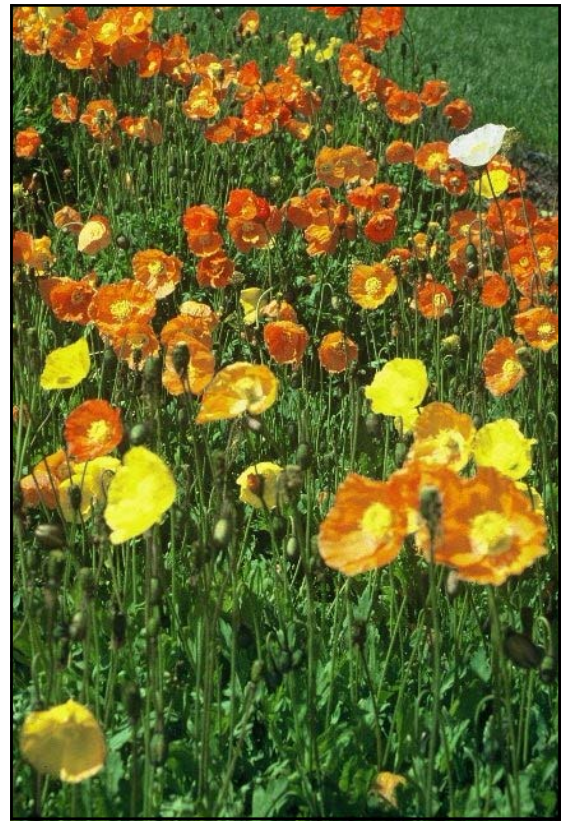
“Manhattan” is a clear lavender that becomes more pale at the outer petal edge ... thus resembling a bi-colored poppy.

“Picotee”, one of the more common bicolors. A pleasant diversion from the single colored orientals.



“Place Pigalle”, which became available in 2006, is probably the most desirable of the bicolors. Available through Jung Seeds. (pg. 10)





Iceland Poppies

Generally, Iceland poppies come in the original species colors of orange, yellow and white. Nevertheless, soft pink is a common cultivar color. These poppies are the longest blooming poppies that can be grown in Montana. They reach their fullest flourish of flowering in the late spring, though continue on until late fall. All Iceland poppies are biennials (they grow the first year and flower in their second year and then die). But in mid-summer their seed ripens and, if the seed drops to the ground, it will germinate, grow and be ready to bloom in the second year. Thus people often think of them as annuals, coming up every year. Unless you kill off the yellow blooming plants, the crop often reverts to only having yellow flowers after several years. White is even more difficult to maintain in the garden. The suggestion is then to collect the seed from the white flowers, and from that seed you should also get yellow and orange flowers. Pink flowered plants have to be kept in isolation if you want seed from these to come "true". Seed catalogs often sell varieties that are bicolors usually with a white picotee edge. These too will not come true unless grown in isolation from the more common species colors. Indeed, many of the presently offered varieties are hand pollinated to maintain the unusual colors of these varieties. Easily grown from seed, very lightly scatter the seed, cover the seed with a fine layer of soil about 1/16th inch deep and, most importantly, keep the surface ground moist until the seedlings emerge. Early spring is the best time to set out the seed.

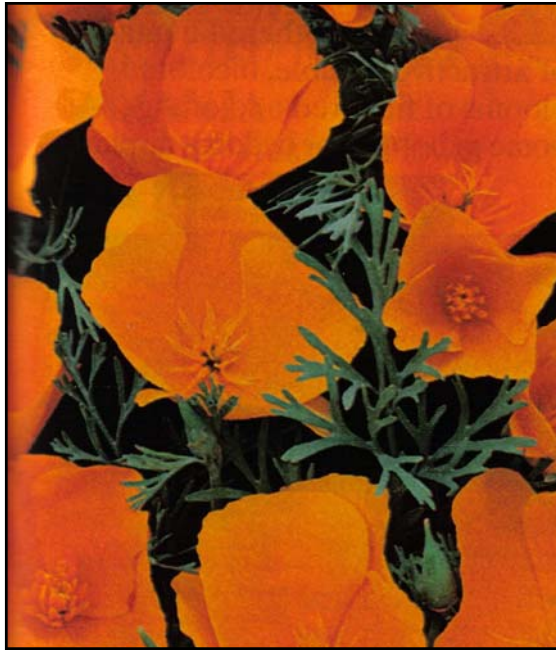


Shirley Poppies

Shirley poppies are the most common poppies grown in Montana. And for good reason. They are the most prolific bloomers of any poppy species. If given enough room in fertile moist soil, the plants will be 18 inches across and as tall with nearly 100 blooms over a 6 week period. If planted in the early spring, they bloom in mid-summer. Some gardeners sow a second crop about 1-2 months after the first to have continuous bloom throughout the growing season. Though red was the original species color, by 1910 pink and later, orange and salmon colors followed. Presently, pastel and dusty colors in the above color range are common. So too are Shirley poppies in fully double flowers. For sheer color density and ease of cultivation, Shirley poppies are an excellent ornamental plant. The most common mistake gardeners make with this plant is that they seed the poppies too close together. Consequently, the plants come up too thick and will be lanky with few blossoms. You can either spend the time to thin out the seedlings or better yet, seed thinly from the start. All poppies make poor transplants with the exception of oriental poppies. If you do thin out the plants to about 9-12 inches, do so before the leaves of the neighboring poppies touch each other. Otherwise, the plants get the message to be tall and thin, not what you want. Fortunately, Shirley poppies do not need very fertile soil, though they excel in nutritious soil. Because Shirley poppies produce so much seed, it is highly advised that you pull the plants by the root before the seed pods ripen. Still enough seed gets away that you should have a large crop for the next year.



Shirley poppies grown by the author in a public garden



California Poppies

The above common orange with a hint of cream is the most common color in California poppies. For sheer flower power it is also the most floriferous. Many other varieties are easily available in colors that range from pale yellow, cream, various other oranges, pink, colors approaching true red and dusty purple. These more exotic colors are produced on plants with fewer flowers and generally have a lower germination rate. Also bicolors and ruffled flowers are common. The plants are generally about 4-5 inches tall, easily grown, self seed, though the seed within a few generations reverts to the common orange unless the plants are kept in isolation from the common orange. The flowers bloom for a two month period beginning for a month in mid-summer, then taking a month vacation and without deadheading bloom for another month. They are among the most colorful plants in a garden. Seed dropped on the ground will survive a Montana winter. But better yet, collect the seed when the long pods are dry and begin to split. At that point collect the partially split pods, place in an open container and have them continue to dry until they completely split open and drop all their seed.

California poppies (foreground) grown by the author, are the most colorful flowers in this section of garden





Opium Poppies

For lack of a better general term, we will call these poppies opium poppies. Actually, all poppies in the *Papaver* genus have opium. But these poppies are particularly potent. The true opium species is *Papaver somniferum*, but the seed is not commercially available in the United States, though some gardeners still cultivate the species. And that species is generally a single lavender poppy about 12-18 inches tall, blooming in mid-summer for about 3 weeks. Very closely related to the true opium poppy (and some say these other species were developed just to get around the legally unavailable *somniferums*) are *Papaver paeoniferum* and *laciniatum* species. *Paeoniferums*, as the name suggests look like peonies, especially the fully double varieties pictured on this page. They range in color from lavender and maroon, true red, orange, salmon, pink and white. Some are bicolored. *Paeoniferums*, when double, are ruffled and *laciniatums* are fringed. All have leathery grey-blue-green leaves, bloom for about 3 weeks in mid-summer, and have about 10 blossoms a plant except when grown too close together or in poor soil. They can be 3 feet tall, though generally about 18 inches tall. The seed when ripe is good to eat, though you'll fail a drug test afterwards. Not much seed survives a Montana winter, so do collect it when ripe. If you have any of the double varieties, pull by the roots any singles that may occur. If the singles cross pollinate with the doubles, you will soon lose the double feature.



At the top of the page is a “black”, actually maroon, paeoniflorum poppy. To the left is a variety called “Antique Flemish” on the right a standard pink variety. All are easy to grow, and are dramatic in the garden, though the bloom period is only about 3 weeks. Thus starting seed in month successions is advised for a longer bloom period. For some reason, the very similar fringed *laciniatums* are becoming harder to find in catalogs, though they can still be found on the internet.

