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In the autumn, a flower aficionado's fancy turns to poppy seeds

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In northern gardens, poppies are the languid wildlings of summer, the stuff of picnics in the meadow and memorable afternoons. They can be tricked into a great show in the Washington garden, where they explode on the scene in May, linger for two or three weeks collectively and then shrivel in the face of the accumulating heat.

They are part of an enormous late-spring bacchanalia that begins with clematis and peonies and embraces catmint, larkspur and the first of the roses and lavender. Even in this crowd, poppies seem outlanders from the north, and their show is all the more tasty for its sense of migration.

Perennial oriental poppies are outrageous in their size and markings, but if their bloom coincides with a precocious hot spell, as it usually does, the show is over before it begins. Annual poppies flower around the same time, but their smaller size is compensated by lots of buds, successively offered. Even in the heat, they have a tangible season.

Now is the moment to buy poppy seed. Getting it to sprout can be a little hit-or-miss, so poppy maniacs sow seed in November, after the fallen leaves have been cleared or mulched, and again in February. Keep the February seeds safely stored in the refrigerator over the winter and make a note on your iPoppy to sprinkle them around Valentine's Day.

Poppy seed loves to sit it out in light, friable soil, and with a thin covering of more fine soil. Germination will be grudging in a heavily mulched bed or on compacted clay. The seed is also tiny, and to spread it evenly, some fastidious gardeners mix it first with dry sand. Young poppy plants don't like to be moved and only develop fully if they are not in direct competition with other plants, including other poppies. Thus, they should be thinned in early spring, just as you would a row of lettuce seedlings.

The aim is to get the poppy seeds to sprout after winter chilling, and by March you should see many young poppy plants with a ground-hugging rosette of small, lobed leaves. This is also the time a similar-looking weed, the hairy bittercress, is about to explode into flower, so it takes a little skill to know what to pull.

Sowing the poppies with sand will minimize this crowding.

In sunny, free-draining beds with a little bit of organic matter, poppies can be counted on to return each year, though not where you planted them or necessarily want them. I have learned to go with the flow.

I am a big fan of the simple red corn poppy, which seems to return in more abundance than the Shirley poppy. A Shirley poppy is a fancy corn poppy, bred for its white, pink and magenta variants, some of which are semi-double. They are worth sowing afresh each fall for a great spring show.

This year, the California seed company [Renee's Garden](#) is offering mouthwatering collections of corn poppy varieties whose anticipation, for me, will help lift winter's pall.

Angel's Choir is a medley of silken blooms in shades of cream, peach, lavender and coral, among others. In some the central pod is green; in others that deep grainy purple singular to poppies and so decadent. My drool meter goes off the charts with another of Renee Shepherd's poppy collections, this one called Falling in Love. The mixture doesn't have quite the broad spectrum of Angels' Choir, but the assemblage of reds, pinks, white and bicolors seems both harmonious and exciting.

I'm conceiving ways of mixing thousands of seeds with sand. Would that mess up the food blender? Could the damage be pinned on me, or could I blame the dog? One of the great imponderables of gardening.

Another is whether you'd get busted for growing the opium poppy. This is a stalwart of any cottage garden. It is bulkier and more upright than the corn poppy, with lovely blue-gray leaves and blooms of incredible richness and saturation. It is not as endearingly demure as the corn poppy but certainly part of the joyful poppy send-off to spring. It is grown in the same way as the corn poppy, and while many seed companies have stopped selling it, it is a fixture in gardens where it has freely self-seeded. Sometimes you can find it sold as the bread poppy, species poppy, peony flowered poppy or carnation poppy. Gardeners who have it are glad to share the ripe seed, though I'd remove the seed from the dried pod before storing to avoid mold.

If your poppies inhabit a big tent, you can bring in the related annual named California poppy. California poppies are cultivated much the same way as true poppies and bloom around the same time. The botanical name contains four vowels but seems to need a great many more: *Eschscholtzia*. California poppies are lower-growing and daintier than poppies and hover above feathery foliage. The colors are impossibly rich. The classic species is an intense orange, but Shepherd also offers Buttercream, which would do a Jersey cow proud. It grows well here; a friend raves over it. I am drawn to Dusky Rose, which opens a magenta pink and then matures to something lighter but very elegant. If only we could age as well before going to seed.