Botanical name: Papaver rhoeas

Common names: Red poppy, corn poppy, Flanders poppy, Shirley poppy

Symbolism: Flanders poppies were immortalized in the World War I poem “Flanders Fields” written in 1915 by the Canadian physician Lieutenant John McCrea and inspired by the death of his friend during the war. Flanders Fields in Belgium was a major battleground during World War I from 1914 to 1918. A million soldiers from over 50 different countries were wounded, missing, or killed in action there.

Description: Flanders poppies are annuals that bloom during the summer. They are native to Europe and considered wildflowers. Their flowers are brilliant red, saucer-like, and somewhat ruffled. Their leaves are deeply lobed and fernlike. They bloom prolifically for approximately one month. See Blooming Season below for ways to extend their blooming season. They grow 12-30 inches tall in a clump or mound with a spread of 0.75 to 1.25 feet. They eventually bear ornamental fruit or seedheads that can prolong their interest.

Deer Resistance: Flanders poppies are deer resistant.

Pollinators: Flanders poppies attract pollinators such as hummingbirds and butterflies.

Growing conditions: Flanders poppies require full sun, partial sun, or partial shade. They grow best in sandy or loamy soil that is well-drained. They prefer cooler weather rather than hot, humid weather.

Planting: Seeds require a germination temperature of at least 55°F. Seeds should be planted outside after the last frost date in the spring. Seeds can be propagated by scattering the seeds on well-worked soil. The fine seeds can be mixed with a little sand before sowing to get a more even spread. After the seeds are scattered on the well-worked soil, they should be pressed gently into the ground (e.g., by hand or by stepping on the seeded area). The bed area should be watered gently to keep the ground somewhat moist until the seedlings have reached 2-4 inches high.

Although seeds can be started indoors prior to the last spring frost, this is not recommended. The poppies have tap roots and are stunted by transplanting.

As an alternative, they can be started in-doors in a container that will be moved outdoors after all danger of frost has passed. Plants started in-doors in containers should be hardened off before setting them outside permanently. This can be accomplished by exposing them to outside conditions gradually. The pots can be placed outside during the day and moved inside during the night for one or two weeks to allow them to adapt to the outside conditions before they are permanently moved outdoors. Direct sunlight and extreme temperatures should be avoided until the plants are adapted to the outside conditions.

Maintenance: Flanders poppies require low to moderate moisture. The beds should be watered periodically during dry spells. Overwatering should be avoided. For ways to extend the blooming season, see Blooming Season below. The poppy plants are tender and fragile. Therefore, they may need support to protect them from heavy rains or furry creatures romping through the poppy beds. See Staking/Companion Plants below for options to support them. The poppies will self-seed and come up the following year. To prevent self-seeding for the subsequent year, seedheads must be dead-headed promptly.

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Blooming Season: Flanders poppies typically bloom 55-65 days after planting according to the AMERICAN MEADOWS, the seed distributor. Their blooming season lasts for a little over one month. There are two approaches for extending the blooming season (deadheading or succession planting). However, extremely hot and humid weather may reduce the success of these approaches.

According to Cornell University, their blooming season can be extended by dead-heading the spent flowers and promptly removing seedheads.

According to AMERICAN MEADOWS, the seed distributor, the best way to ensure continuous blooms from July through September is to do monthly succession planting. For example, initial seeds should be planted in Bed 1 after danger of frost is passed (e.g., around Mother’s Day in Southeastern PA or May 14). The second planting should take place in Bed 2 one month later than the Bed 1 planting (e.g., June 14), and the third planting should take place in Bed 3 one month later than the Bed 2 planting (e.g., July 14).

Staking/Companion Plants: Two options for providing support to protect tender poppies from heavy rains or romping furry creatures include staking and companion planting.

For small beds or borders, staking may be preferable. Wooden stakes, reeds, and bamboo can be used to hold plants upright. The stakes should be about 4-6 inches shorter than the mature plants, so they will not be conspicuous or interfere with the bloom beauty. Before the plants are fully grown (approximately one-third to one-half their normal size), the stake should be placed in the ground fairly close to the plant, but being careful to minimize disturbance to plant roots. Twine or yarn can be used to secure the plant in several places as it grows. A double loop should be used to tie the plant to the stake with one loop gently looped around the plant and the other looped around the stake.

For larger beds and field plots, companion planting is preferable for supporting the poppies because staking becomes impractical. Bachelor buttons or cornflowers (Centaurea cyanus) are an attractive companion for Flanders poppies, and the combination produces a meadow look. They are native to Europe and are considered wildflowers. They are annuals with bright blue flowers that grow in a clump to a height of about 28-36 inches tall. They can be sown at the same time as the Flanders poppies, and they have similar growing conditions to the poppies. They bloom throughout the summer until fall frost. Bachelor Buttons attract birds, particularly goldfinches. They are also deer-resistant.

Seed coverage: A standard packet of Flanders poppy seeds will cover 20-40 square feet. Seeds can be purchased in bulk: 1/4 lb. of seeds covers 5,445 sq. ft.; 1 lb. covers 21,780 square feet; 2-4 lb. covers 1 acre (2 lb. produce a meadow look and 4 lb. produce a lush stand).

Seed specifications: Seeds are non-GMO and Neonicotinoid-Free. They can be stored in a cool dry place that is not subject to extreme temperature variations.