



## Italian Red Poppies

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*Rick Gush*

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Late May is when the red poppies are blooming all over Italy, and I'm very happy to report that my garden is now participating in this colorful extravaganza.

Perhaps I should say finally participating.

I've been trying for several years to get these wildflowers to establish in the garden, and progress was slow or nonexistent for the first few years.

My wife and I collected seed pods during our summer hikes, but various problems, most notably my own incompetence, slowed down the project. One year I lost all the seed we had collected, and another year I made the mistake of sealing the seeds in a jar that also had a few other wildflower seeds that weren't completely dry, and the result was a mouldy mess.

This plant, *Papaver rhoeas*, is a southern Mediterranean native plant that has spread north.

Here in Italy, Tuscany seems to be where they grow most freely, but all over Italy these flowers are common. Riding on the trains in May, one can see miles of train tracks covered with the red flowers, and many wheat plantings are so infested that huge fields are almost completely covered in red.

All this color draws artists like flies, and paintings of red poppy covered meadows are almost a cliché tourist product.

### Don't Forget About the Seeds

The seeds of this poppy are tasty, and are often collected for culinary use, but they are much smaller than the poppy seeds one sees on muffins at Starbucks.

Most of the poppy seeds used in cooking around the world are not from this species, but from *Papaver somniferum* (the heroin poppy) and other types. This red poppy has spread north over much of Europe and is the poppy mentioned in the famous Flanders Fields poem. These red poppies are still connected with many World War I remembrance ceremonies.

### Propagating Poppies

I had two little poppy plants in the garden last year, and I saved those plants after they dried up in summer, pulling off the seed pods when they were brown and dry. I planted the seeds in the fall; or rather I stood at the top of the garden and threw the mixture of crushed seed pods down over the terraces below.

The result this spring was an amazing quantity of little poppy plants all over the garden. In early May the plants started flowering, and by this weekend, the garden was ablaze with the bright red flowers.

Amusingly, I also had to cut huge quantities of the poppies down to make way for spring planting. This same plant that I had been so hopefully nurturing has now become a pesky weed in the garden and I had to remove a whole bunch of mature blooming plants along with all the other weeds when I was ready to start planting.

I imagine that next year I'll have even more poppies, and the hillside garden will be completely covered with red flowers.

It wouldn't surprise me if a few artists show up with their easels next May.

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