

Gerald Ensley: Amidst that tall grass, the wildflowers bloom

GERALD ENSLEY • DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER • AUGUST 2, 2009

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You may soon notice the grass getting a little longer along U.S. Highway 98 in Wakulla County. But before you start tsk-tsking highway maintenance, be aware this is purposeful.

ADVERTISEMENT Wakulla County has signed on for a pilot project to grow more wildflowers along the roadside by mowing the grass less frequently.

If more counties follow suit, Florida could be a carpet of wildflowers by 2013 when the state celebrates the 500th anniversary of the arrival of explorer Ponce de Leon – who named us La Florida or "flowered land."

"We're pushing hard for increased awareness," said Jeff Caster, a Florida Department of Transportation landscape architect. "We want wildflowers to be an iconic symbol of Florida, just like manatees, panthers and palm trees."

The Wakulla County project will be along the 12 miles of U.S. 98 from Newport to Medart.

The project originated from residents: In May, DOT-contracted mowers did their usual mowing along that stretch just as wildflowers were in full bloom. It caused an outcry from citizens to county and state officials – spurred by the irony that it was state wildflower week in Florida.

Caster held a meeting with residents — and told them about a program that could prevent such carnage in the future.

In recent years, the DOT has worked with several counties to reduce mowings and encourage wildflowers. Wildflowers bloom in spring and fall. The DOT mows most roadsides and medians five to seven times a year.

But when the number of mowings (as well as the area mowed) are reduced to two or three times a year – such as in early spring and late summer – wildflowers can bloom, drop seed and propagate the next year in the medians and roadsides.

Reducing mowing has been embraced in rural Suwannee, Columbia and Madison counties as well as populous Volusia County (Daytona Beach), which started an annual wildflower festival. Other counties, such as Gadsden County, have inquired about the program.

The DOT has been particularly pushing the concept as the 2013 Quincentennial approaches.

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"I think people coming to Florida are going to expect it," said Jeff Norcini, a private horticulture consultant who has been working with Wakulla County. "They'll wonder why are we named land of flowers."

ADVERTISEMENT Citizens and county commissioners are meeting Thursday in Wakulla County to hammer out the details. Caster said signs will be put along U.S. 98 to alert drivers. He said 10 feet on each side of the road will continue to be mowed to allow cars to pull off.

Residents are excited by the program, said Brandy Cowley-Gilbert.

She and her husband own Just Fruits and Exotics, a teaching nursery on U.S. Highway 98. Cowley-Gilbert canvassed the more than 40 households along the 12-mile rural stretch of highway slated for wildflowers – and found only one person opposed to the reduced mowing.

"There is a phenomenal amount of support. People want to see wildflowers," said Cowley-Gilbert. "Even big burly rednecks say 'I love this county and the reason I live here is because of the beautiful natural setting.'"

Reduced mowing has several advantages.

The DOT spends about \$17 million a year to mow Florida's 12,000 miles of roadsides five to seven times a year — an amount that could be reduced significantly if mowings were reduced to two to three times a year.

Fewer mowings also would mean fewer workers jeopardizing their safety working by speeding cars. Fewer mowings would mean less fuel consumed. The medians and roadsides would grow longer grass



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fewer mowings would mean less fuel consumed. The meadows and roadsides would grow longer grass which benefits bugs, reptiles and wildlife.

And wildflowers could grow. That would provide more habitat for Florida's endangered bee populations. It would provide more market for Florida wildflower seed growers. And it would provide more beauty, which would encourage more eco-tourism.

"You get color, you save money, you promote tourism and ecologically, it's very good," Norcini said. "It's a win-win situation."

A decade ago, the DOT planted wildflowers and reduced mowings along several Leon County roads. There was a particularly colorful profusion of wildflowers along Mahan Drive between Magnolia Drive and Capital Circle. But Caster said that was the work of a since-deceased local DOT manager, Ralph Carter, who was enthusiastic about wildflowers.

He said there has been no requests from Leon County to revive its roadside wildflowers — but there could be.

"As I told (the Wakulla County Commission), you need only two things to have wildflowers: Good timing (on mowing) and good community commitment," Caster said. "If citizens want more wildflowers, they need to tell the DOT."

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