

Wildflowers

~ the Greening of Tourism

by Kay Semion



Picture Florida as it might have been in 1513, when Ponce de Leon landed near St. Augustine and dubbed the area Tierra La Florida (land of flowers).

Then picture it again in 2013 with throngs of tourists walking, biking and roller-blading along Florida's newest paved trail, lined with a wealth of wildflowers, along the coastal areas where Ponce de Leon once sailed.

Now imagine further: Follow the path down the seashore to Titusville, west to Enterprise where the St. Johns River expands into Lake Monroe, north past West Volusia's lush natural springs and north again to the St. Johns River in Palatka.

That is the St. Johns River to the Sea Loop (see graphic at left), a trail in the making that a few chosen bicyclists (including me) rode in November under the aegis of Bike Florida (www.bikeflorida.org).

Today, it's a trail of bike lanes, back roads and some multiuse paths. But five counties (St. Johns, Flagler, Volusia, Brevard and Putnam) and many partners have committed in writing to making it happen by the 2013 anniversary celebration of Ponce de Leon's visit.

Tomorrow, the Loop could be not only the state's longest multi-use eco-tourism trail (nearly 300 miles) but also the state's first official wildflower trail.

"We hope that will come true," says Lisa Roberts, executive director of the Florida Wildflower Foundation (www.floridawildflowerfoundation.org). "There's a lot of potential. We believe Florida's wildflowers are the tourism equivalent of the north's fall colors." She notes that Texas brings in millions of dollars from its wildflower tourism program.

Work toward the wildflower trails is already underway in the Flagler area through Florida's Historic A1A Coastal Scenic Byway (www.scenic1a.org), which has won grants through the Wildflower Foundation to plant and seed flowers south to Gamble Rogers Memorial State Recreation Area.

"A lot will happen in July of '09," says Sallie O'Hara, the scenic byway program administrator who has been instrumental in spreading wildflower seeds.

West Volusia, meanwhile, continues to draw in thousands of visitors for its annual Florida Wildflower Festival – the only one in the state. The DeLand area is also part of the trail Loop. Renee Tallevast, executive director of the River of Lakes Heritage Corridor, which coordinates the event, is also working toward making U.S. Highway 17/92 north of DeLand the state's first Wildflower Highway.

"West Volusia is providing a model we hope other cities and counties can get into," says Roberts.

Roberts notes that Volusia County's government is exploring planting wildflowers along roadsides. "When you plant wildflowers, you save in mowing, manpower and gasoline," she says. Wildflowers do require weeding and occasional mowing but a lot less maintenance than roadside grasses.

What could turn the St. Johns River to the Sea Loop into a Wildflower Trail and Florida into a state drawing tourists in search of wildflowers?

"People getting behind it," says Roberts without hesitation – people from cities, counties, bicycle groups, garden clubs, colleges and universities.

Restoring native wildflowers to Florida will draw in tourists, and it will also draw in butterflies, bees and other insects, which are then food for birds and other animals. Thus boosting the tourism economy will benefit the natural ecosystem. It's a win-win.

