

# Spring is here, bedecked with wildflowers

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By Lashonda Stinson Curry

Grassy medians are awash with pink. Patches of purples and pops of yellow blanket the grass that lines roadways.

Spring is here, and the wildflowers are out.

The native plants started to flower in March with the little pink, purple and white phlox and the purple lyreleaf sage. Then the state wildflower - Coreopsis, also known as tickseed - and black-eyed Susan added yellow to the landscape color mix. Indian blanket flowers, orange-red in color with yellow tips, can be found in the area. There's also prickly poppy, a tall, white flower with ruffle-like petals.

The most colorful wildflower displays are along Interstate 75 and North U.S. 441. Brian Quinn lives near Alachua and is president of the Paynes Prairie Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society. He said there's a diverse offering of wildflowers in and around High Springs, but venturing off the main highway is a treat for the eyes.

"The side roads are really the best ones," said Quinn, who has mullein, a European wildflower that grows at least 3 feet tall, in his neighborhood.

Other places for nice wildflower spotting, Quinn said, are County Road 235A and the road between Micanopy and Cross Creek, County Road 346/325.

Claudia Larsen, member of the Gainesville chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society, said blue-eyed grass, coral bean and greeneyes - yellow with a green center - also are in bloom. Evinston has many greeneyes, she said, and the white Atmasco lily can be found on State Road 26 in Melrose.

Wildflowers should be left undisturbed so they can produce seed that will germinate each year, but mowing is a threat to the plants. The county's Public Works Department and the state Department of Transportation are responsible for maintaining the roads and medians. Workers are supposed to avoid mowing wildflower beds, but unfortunately, it does happen occasionally.

"It's the policy of the department to not mow wildflowers. ... Unless the flowers are in bloom, or explicitly marked by signs, it is difficult to avoid them with large equipment over large areas," said Jeff Caster, landscape architect with FDOT.

The agency staff, Caster added, is working with the Florida Wildflower Foundation and others "to learn more about wildflowers with goal of creating and conserving managed

meadows for everyone to enjoy."

Hector Pérez also has a wildflower project in the works at the University of Florida. The assistant professor in the Environmental Horticulture Department said they are creating a wildflower meadow on campus. They're installing the meadow in phases and plan to have some of the display areas seeded by the end of May. Some might be in flower by fall, he said.

"If people were more aware of the diversity of the wildflowers and all the colors, people would start using them more in the landscaping in the home," Pérez said.

For now, most people admire the vibrant wildflowers from behind the wheel. Sometimes, the beauty beckons drivers to pull over and take a picture or pick a few.

But don't get greedy.

"Where it is safe to pick wildflowers, pick a few for the enjoyment, but leave most behind," Caster advised.

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