

Flower carpets result from cold winter

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APRIL 21, 2010 – A blaze of colorful flowers blanketing Volusia and Flagler counties owes its beauty to the damp, miserable cold weather during the first three months of the year.

Wildflowers have cropped up "like gangbusters" all across the state, said Lisa Roberts, executive director of the Florida Wildflower Foundation. "We're getting reports from everywhere.

Bonnie Cary, a naturalist with Volusia County Land Acquisition and Management, keeps hearing from people impressed with the carpet of wildflowers seen around the area.

On lawns, along roadsides, in swamps and deep in the forests and woods, lavenders, yellows, pinks and reds bloom in waves, patches and sometimes on single stems.

Because Florida's abundant native wildflowers emerged from the frigid cold without any problems, Cary said that sends a strong message about the benefits of natives.

"It has made quite a lot of folks realize native things are beautiful," she said.

The natives are perfectly adapted to the climate, Roberts said. "They came right back, where some of the exotics are struggling to come back."

In particular, she said, the delicate lavender single-stemmed blossoms called common blue toadflax are "just incredible" this year.

"So many people noticed it this year and so many people were asking what it was," Cary said. She was surprised at the number of people who haven't mowed their grass, or who mowed around the lavender blossoms, and left patches standing in their yards.

"I think it may encourage folks to look at wildflowers and maybe change their mowing habits," she said.

How many varieties of wildflowers are found in Florida?

More than 3,000. We're finding new species all the time, Roberts said. "Just recently we found two new species of coreopsis, the official state wildflower. "Subtle differences in the genetics and, bingo, you have a new species."

Does the Florida Department of Transportation do anything to promote and protect the wildflower patches we see along Interstate 4 and other highways?

Yes. The department has an active wildflower program, setting aside money each year for wildflower seeds and maintaining blooming areas along many roadsides.

In addition to marking areas where seeds have been planted to make sure they're not mown until after wildflower season, department officials say they're also working to encourage mowing contractors to work around other locations where wildflowers bloom in great numbers.

Is anything else helping produce more wildflowers?

Yes. "Counties, cities and even the state have reduced mowing," Roberts said. "When you don't mow, you're going to get wildflowers. We would be really happy if people mowed less."

Wildflowers support pollinators and less mowing means less emissions and costs, she said. "It's just a win-win."

What are these state wildflower license plates?

Sales of the tag, which features a coreopsis, benefit the wildflower foundation. The foundation receives \$15 from each tag sold and uses the money for research, education and planting. In 2008, 18,578 plates were sold.

What does the wildflower foundation do?

Promotes wildflower appreciation, to encourage landscaping and lawn maintenance that allows native wildflowers to bloom. The foundation started a seeds for schools program this spring, planning to give 20 teachers \$50 awards for wildflower seeds. The application process ended early after more than 80 applications were received. "We had no idea it was going to be so amazingly successful," Roberts said.