

Wild & colorful: Some tips from Florida's wildflower enthusiasts

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Wildflowers are everywhere - on roadsides, in fields and in your own backyard. For something so prominent in Florida, little is known about them, even by scientists.

As these native flower species begin blooming once again, there are a few facts wildflower enthusiasts say people should know.

1 What makes them wild.

Wildflowers are deemed "wild" because they grow well under natural conditions, said Jeff Norcini, a horticulturalist and private consultant on wildflowers and grasses.

"Wildflowers don't need water or landscaping," Norcini said. "You aren't going to see petunias growing in the wild, they need TLC; they need water and fertilizer to look nice."

Norcini said wildflowers can take that kind of attention, but they do not need it. He said he fertilizes his personal wildflower garden once a year and only waters it in a drought.

2 Taking pictures is better than picking wildflowers.

They may make a pretty bouquet, but wildflowers should not be picked.

"We'd rather have people take pictures of wildflowers because the plants are needed to keep their community going," said Cammie Donaldson, executive director of the Association of Florida Native Nurseries.

Donaldson, who also works with the Florida Native Plant Society, suggests that people try to identify wildflowers they like and consider incorporating them into their personal garden.

3) Wildflowers attract wildlife.

Because the flowers are pollinators, they attract insects like butterflies and bees, as well as birds.

Lisa Robert, executive director of the Florida Wildflower Foundation, said wildflowers have a special relationship with the ecosystem and are an important part of what makes everything in nature fit.

Roberts said her two wildflower gardens are bursting with life.

"The wildlife I get in my yard is just incredible," Roberts said. "It's a pleasure to watch the butterflies and watch the birds."

4) Wildflowers help other plants thrive.

Norcini said wildflowers do not compete well with other plant species, so they are abundant in open, disturbed areas, like land after a wildfire.

"If you go into an area that was burnt the following year, a lot of times you will see nice wildflowers," Norcini said. "They are one of the first things that moves in."

Norcini said after wildflowers grow, wooded plants will also begin to grow again and will take over the area. The wildflowers help prepare the soil for wooded plants, like shrubs and trees, to move in, Norcini said.

5) Its best to have different species when you grow.

Donaldson has about 60 different native plant species in her yard. She said the plants attract a variety of wildlife.

"You should select many different species, so you always have something blooming," Donaldson said. "You want to have things blooming all year long, so you can feed a variety of animals yearlong."

Donaldson also suggested mixing in bunch grass with native species to mimic nature.

6) Plant in a pattern to distinguish weeds from wildflowers.

When planting wildflowers, Norcini said it is important to plant them in a pattern because they can resemble weeds in the seedling stage.

"One of the things I recommend is to plant the wildflower seed in a pattern, like 'X' or 'O,' so you can see the pattern and you know what they look like, as opposed to the weed seedling," Norcini said. "You want to be able to distinguish what you want and don't want."

7) There's a license plate to help Florida Wildflower Foundation.

For an additional \$28, drivers can purchase a wildflower license plate for their cars. For every license plate sold, \$15 will be given to the Florida Wildflower Association to fund their efforts to educate, research and plant wildflowers.

Members of the foundation travel around the state educating people on wildflowers. The foundation has four research programs at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences in the horticulture department, and they are involved in planting wildflowers all over the state.

Roberts said people really enjoy the wildflowers the foundation grows, especially the flowers at the Okahumpka Service Plaza on the Florida's Turnpike.

"That planting gets a lot of attention and it's blooming right now," Roberts said. "People love it. They pull over and have pictures taken it."

8) There's a lot people still do not know about wildflowers.

Roberts said there are still a lot of things to be discovered about wildflowers.

The foundation's initiatives at UF's IFAS program are helping shine some light on these native species.

"One of our studies at UF is about wiregrass and it only reproduces with fire," Roberts said. "We are trying to figure out how the seeds can be viable if fire's not involved and how we can duplicate that."

Donaldson said there have been recent efforts to learn how to reproduce certain plants, so their seeds can be sold to consumers to be grown in their personal gardens.

9) Plant only native seeds in your garden.

There are wildflower species, such as the Black-eyed Susan, that grow all over the country, Norcini said.

But nationwide growth does not mean any Black-eyed Susan seeds from the store will work in your garden.

"You want plants adapted to Florida," Norcini said. "The plant sources are adapted to our conditions, pests and diseases."

Instead of generic seeds from the store, Norcini said to make sure the seeds are Florida-adapted wildflower seeds.

10) Places to see wildflowers.

Donaldson said there are at least 60 to 80 native plant species in Florida, and there are several great places to see wildflowers.

To get a close look at wildflowers, Florida has several trails, like the Florida National Scenic Trail, and state parks, like the Everglades State Park, where you can see the native plants, according to the Florida Wildflower Foundation's website.

But in general, the best places to view wildflowers are open areas in rural settings along two- and four-lane roads, including interstates.

In the Florida Panhandle, wildflowers can be spotted on County Road 379 in Liberty County and State Road 65 in Franklin and Liberty counties. In North Florida, there are wildflowers on U.S. Highway 17 between Palatka and DeLeon Springs, on U.S. Highway 27 in Suwannee County, or on State Road 20 and U.S. 441 in Alachua County.