

Will pretty flowers draw tourists to Brevard?

By Dave Berman
Florida Today

BREVARD COUNTY - Amid the seas of purple and pink and yellow wildflowers in local parks and along the roadside, ecotourism advocates are envisioning green -- the money that visitors would bring to the area to see the natural blooms.

A niche called "wildflower tourism" is starting to grow in Florida, and tourism officials say it may be the next big thing -- possibly along the lines of viewing the changing leaf colors during fall in New England. Local experts say May is when wildflowers are at their peak viewing in this region. And this May has been better than in most years, thanks to a colder-than-normal and wetter-than-normal winter that has led to the intense blooms.

[VIDEO: Wildflower tourism push](#)

"Nature tourism is huge, and it is growing," said Lisa Roberts, executive director of the Florida Wildflower Foundation. "It is a green form of tourism, and we see a lot of potential for growth there." She said she has gotten inquiries from as far away as England and Germany, asking for advice on viewing wildflowers in Central Florida.

Bonnie King, director of marketing for the Space Coast Office of Tourism, said wildflower tourism still is a relatively underdeveloped niche that her agency wants to tap.

"It's a logical next step for us to do," King said. "We are going to work to make it happen."

That will include developing more trail loops within Brevard County, as well as promoting wildflower tourism on the Space Coast Office of Tourism Web site and in other marketing efforts.

From an economic standpoint, King said, "it's a matter of 'heads in beds' " -- getting tourists to stay longer at local hotels and spend more during their stay.

"It's extending their stay," King said. "If they're coming for a day, we want them for two days. If they're already coming for two or three days, we want them for four or five days."

Brevard County Commissioner Robin Fisher said he sees strong potential for this niche as well, especially as budget-conscious people in a tight economy are looking for tourism options that don't cost too much money, compared with a theme-park vacation or a cruise.

"I think that the whole ecotourism industry is really big," said Fisher, who is working with environmentalists, tourism experts and economic-development experts to expand the sector in Brevard.

"It's a big, untapped opportunity," said Cammie Donaldson of Melbourne, executive director of the Association of Florida Native Nurseries and administrator of the Florida Native Plant Society.

She said people vacation in states that intensely market wildflower tourism -- like North Carolina, Tennessee and Texas -- to view the wildflowers, when Florida has just as much or more to offer.

"It's pretty easy for anybody to enjoy," Donaldson said. "A lot of wildflower viewing can be done by the seat of your car," driving along Interstate 95, U.S. 1, U.S. 192, State Road 50 and State Road 520, for example.

But Roberts said she would like to see less mowing along the road median and shoulder areas during wildflower season.

"We would have so many more flowers if we did not mow as much along the roadsides," Roberts said, noting that wildflowers "support wildlife and they draw wildlife."

Local parks and sanctuary areas also offer venues to see wildflowers.

Five-county loop

Among the more visible efforts in this area is the St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop, a 260-mile bicycling and walking trail under development in a five-county area that includes northern Brevard County. The route also includes parts of Putnam, St. Johns, Flagler, and Volusia counties.

Roberts said she would like it to become the first dedicated wildflower trail in the state.

Trail tourism "is green, and it suits a lot of people in America today," said Herb Hiller, a consultant to the East Coast Greenway Alliance and longtime trails advocate. "The potential is enormous. It could be as significant, in a way, as fall foliage is up north. This is the time to pay attention and take advantage of it. This is a wildflower-abundant region. It's a prime viewing area."

He said the state tourism marketing agency Visit Florida plans to debut a new website later this year that will focus on trail tourism, including walking, biking, horseback-riding and paddling venues.

"Wildflowers are an important part of Florida's history," Visit Florida public affairs manager Dia Kuykendall said. "When Ponce de Leon landed here and saw the beautiful array of flowers, he proclaimed, 'Pasqua Florida,' meaning feast of flowers. Our mission is to promote tourism to and within Florida, and there are definitely ways we can promote Florida's beautiful wildflowers."

Hiller said about 50 miles of the St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop is paved, and can be used by people with touring bikes. Most of the loop otherwise is accessible for hikers and mountain bikers.

The Gainesville-based organization Bike Florida already is marketing weeklong tours along the St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop area, Hiller added.

But it's not necessary for people to travel very far to see a blanket of colorful wildflowers.

"In my backyard, it's absolutely crazy" with wildflowers, said Greg Krolczyk of Cornelia Avenue in Palm Bay. He said the cold winter held back growth of trees and bushes, so "it's pretty much of a blank slate for wildflowers. You see a lot more of them. It's really ridiculous."

"This year is probably one of the best years we've ever had in Florida" for wildflowers, said Roberts, who describes Brevard County wildflower viewing as "so rich in so many ways."

"I've never seen things flower like they are now," said Barbara Judd, sanctuary maintenance technician at the Enchanted Forest Sanctuary in Titusville. "All the wildflowers are really jumping now. They are just exploding. It's just one thing after another after another" blooming in the Enchanted Forest's gardens, which has about 50 types of wildflowers represented.

'One-two punch'

King said she envisions the wildflower marketing as working to help persuade someone coming to the Space Coast for a beach weekend or to visit the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex to extend his or her stay to tour the area by car, by bike or on foot to view wildflowers.

Roberts also sees the potential to package viewing wildflowers in combination with bird-watching, an activity epitomized by the successful annual Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival held at various Brevard sites. The six-day birding festival brings \$900,000 to \$1 million into the county's economy.

"It's a one-two punch," Roberts said. "You get birds and you get wildflowers."

And, just like birders who travel the country to see rare birds to add to their so-called "life lists" of bird sightings, wildflower aficionados could do the same when they look for rare flowers.

"In birding, that's really, really common," Donaldson said.

Hiller said he would like to see a system in which wildflower viewers get the word out to others if they see a rare flower in the wild, much as birders do with rare birds.

"There are people out there like me who want to see wildflowers they haven't seen before," Roberts said.

Contact Berman at 360-1016 or dberman@floridatoday.com.