

Wild and colorful in the woods

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Wildflowers color the landscape in Florida's natural areas, in fields along the sides of rural roads and just about anywhere else they decide to take root.

Many of us who have spent time on Florida's hiking trails or driving the less populated center of the state have learned to identify a few of the state's common wildflowers, such as the daisy-like tickseed - the yellow flower with a brown center shown on Florida's wildflower specialty license plate.

But going on a wildflower hike with trained eyes is always interesting because experts can find and identify so many of the colorful flowers along the trail.

More than 300 varieties of wildflowers are native to Florida, according to "The Guide to Florida Wildflowers" by Walter Kingsley Taylor. But with wildflowers brought in from Europe and other places, the number of wildflower species growing in the state exceeds 3,000.

During a hike Saturday along the rain-soaked hiking trails of the J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area, wildflower experts Beth Burger and Paul Cummings of the Florida Trail Association showed us more than two dozen types of wildflowers - from the showy stalks of goldenrod to the neat, white flowers of bog buttons.

We began our hike at the trail head near the Hungryland Boardwalk just west of the Everglades Youth Conservation Camp and sloshed through tea-colored water, about ankle deep, during much of the walk.

Hiking with wildflower enthusiasts is hardly a workout. It's more like a botanical scavenger hunt. We stopped frequently to photograph and discuss the flowers found growing along the hiking trail.

"It's the journey," hiker Lance Blake said. "If I was in a hurry, I'd stick to a sidewalk."

The purplish flowers of the blazing star attracted our attention, as did the purple-and-white flowers of the Glades Lobelia.

The long stems of yellow-eyed grass seem to proudly hold the flowers high off the ground for passers-by to notice, while the downward-facing flowers of the pine hyacinth seem to be modestly hiding themselves from view.

Near the end of our hike, we came upon the showiest wildflower of the day - the pine lily, also known as a Catesby's Lily, whose six red leaves are garnished with splotches of white and yellow and purplish-brown dots.

Looking into the vegetation on the side of a dirt road, Cummings pointed out the common Spanish needle, a member of the aster family whose white flower has a yellowish-orange center. Spanish needle is often found growing in unmowed areas in cities and is known to attract butterflies.

"It's one of the best butterfly plants there is," Cummings said of the Spanish needle.

FINDING FLORIDA WILDFLOWERS

Where to find them: In Palm Beach County and the Treasure Coast, try looking for wildflowers along the hiking trails at Jonathan Dickinson State Park in Hobe Sound; John D. MacArthur Beach State Park on Singer Island;

the Dupuis Management Area on State Road 76 west of Indiantown; and the J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area off Seminole Pratt-Whitney Road. (Note that hunting seasons may be open at wildlife management areas such as Corbett and Dupuis. Check season dates before heading out.)

Natural areas: Wildflowers can be found in many of Palm Beach County's natural areas. A guide to the county's natural areas can be found at www.pbcgov.com/erm/natural/natural-areas.

Identification: Florida wildflower guides include the waterproof flip guide "Wildflowers of Southeast Florida" by Roger L. Hammer (Quick Reference Publishing) and "The Guide to Florida Wildflowers" by Walter Kingsley Taylor (Taylor Publishing).

Online guide: To browse plants throughout Florida, go to the online Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants at <http://Florida.plantatlas.usf.edu>.

Seasons: Fall and spring are best, but Florida wildflowers can be found throughout the year.

Etiquette: Feel free to take photos, but leave wildflowers where they are for everyone to enjoy. Picking wildflowers at a state park could result in fines.

Wildflower hikes: The Florida Trail Association leads wildflower hikes periodically. For more information, go to www.Floridatrail.org.

Wildflower foundation: Sales of Florida's wildflower license tags support research, education and planting of native Florida wildflowers through the Florida Wildflower Foundation. The foundation's website (www.flawildflowers.org) features a "bloom report" showing where wildflowers are blooming throughout the state.

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