

Get into some drive-by gardening — on the Veterans Expressway

By Penny Carnathan, Times Staff Writer

Published Tuesday, March 6, 2012

I've been driving the Veterans Expressway since it was built 17 years ago and I've been thankful for it every day. Before the Veterans, going north or south from Town 'N Country was all twisty roads and red lights. Now I get where I'm going more quickly.

Last month, I discovered my favorite highway is so much more than a convenient means to a destination. It's a 57-mile-long garden, if you include the Suncoast Parkway, which you should. It's the same road. And, like our own gardens, it's springing into bloom.

I never noticed the plants before because my commute was southbound, toward downtown Tampa from Waters Avenue. In December, it flipped. Now I head north from Linebaugh Avenue to N Dale Mabry Highway. It's a much more relaxed drive because I'm going against rush-hour traffic. Now, I have the luxury of taking in the landscape.

First to catch my eye in February were the giant shrubs — easily 12 feet tall by 10 feet across — exploding in creamy blooms.

"Walter's viburnum," I thought after a few days of looking. But I've never seen them so big.

Next, I spied stands of exquisite little trees loaded with snowy flowers north and south of Ehrlich Road. Their leafless dark trunks and limbs arch with sculptural grace. Absolutely beautiful.

"Crape myrtles?" I wondered.

Because I also have plenty of time now to think during my commute, I started wondering about the people who added all this pretty. Those landscape designers probably could have gotten away with palmettos, coonties and cabbage palms — great plants, yes, but, hey, not be-still-my-heart types. Instead, someone thought about flowers and creating eye-catching contrasts in color, texture and height. All for me. Um, I mean us. How sweet!

It turns out there are a number of reasons Florida's Turnpike Enterprise gives its highways — and those of us who drive them — extra love.

"Customers on turnpike roads expect more from us because they pay to use them," says Christa Deason, a media relations specialist who also happens to be a home gardener. "And they're gateway roads for tourists. The Veterans is near Tampa International Airport and Raymond James Stadium."

Read: Visitors travel these roads, and we sure don't want to disappoint them.

Creating this flowering wonderland is a challenge, Christa says. For a plant, living next to a highway is tough enough; add to that, these guys don't get regular irrigation or fertilizer. So the designers absolutely have to follow the right plant/right place rule. Their palette is heavy on Florida natives. Not everything works everywhere.

"We have a lot of oleanders near Anderson Road," Christa says. "They work well in urban areas and they're very showy when in bloom. But we don't use them anymore in rural settings that are subject to brush fires because they emit a poisonous smoke if they catch fire."

Guy Murtonen, the turnpike's environmental project manager, says his hands-down favorite turnpike tree is native chickasaw plum, *Prunus agustifolia*.

"It's the best tree ever planted on any roadway," he says. "It's starting to bloom now, and it's absolutely stunning. It bushes out in white flowers and the limbs have very dramatic shapes."

"It does well in wet areas, dry areas, on slopes or flat ground."

Those artsy little trees I spotted near Ehrlich? Chickasaw plum!

Guy is also a fan of Walter's viburnum, *Viburnum obovatum*. In home landscapes, we're used to seeing the dwarf variety. The biggies are far more dramatic.

"Walter's viburnum is a fantastic plant — right next to chickasaw plum," Guy says. "Plant a row, control it with shearing, and you'll be rewarded with a solid white wall in the spring."

A plant that hasn't lived up to the hype is Fakahatchee grass, *Tripsacum dactyloides*.

"It was very popular five years ago, but it isn't as dry-tolerant as cordgrass and we've had a huge issue with mites attacking it," Guy says.

Three years ago, the turnpike enterprise added another layer of color: wildflowers.

"We have 10 beds covering more than 10 acres all up and down the Suncoast Parkway, from the Pasco-Hernando county line north to Citrus County," says Chris Grossenbacher, wildflower program manager. They're a hit with the motoring public.

"We get a lot of compliments," he says.

Most of what you'll see now are native *Zephyranthes* — rain lilies — a threatened species in Florida (so don't go digging them up!).

You may also see cosmos, Scarlet Ladies' Tresses terrestrial orchids, and scrub morning glories in new "no mow zones."

"By keeping the mowers off, we get the wildflowers to come up naturally," Guy says. "It's been a big surprise for us."

All of these plants, of course, are great choices for your low-maintenance, high-impact yard, depending on whether you're sunny or shady, dry or wet. Home gardeners can learn a lot from taking in the view on their commute, say Christa, Guy and Chris.

"We do want drivers to concentrate on the road," Christa says. "But we like it when they can enjoy the scenery, too."

For tourists, it's about first impressions. For the rest of us? It's Florida Gardening 101.

Penny Carnathan can be reached at penlyn1@tampabay.rr.com. Check out more Florida gardening photos and stories on her blog, digginfladirt.com, or chat with other local gardeners at www.facebook.com/digginfloridadirt.