

Participatory art project to celebrate Florida's 500th anniversary

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Four hundred and ninety-nine years ago, while Spain and its colonies celebrated *Pascua Florida* ("Festival of Flowers" in honor of the Easter season), Juan Ponce de León sighted land after being at sea for nearly a month. The vibrant colors of the blooming landscape and dense greenery must have seemed like serendipity to the explorer and inspired him to name this unknown land *La Florida*, which derives from the Spanish word for flower.

Xavier Cortada, left, planting wildflowers alongside Secretary of State Ken Detzner.

In preparation for next year's 500 year anniversary of Ponce de Leon's arrival, [FIU's College of Architecture + The Arts' Office of Engaged Creativity](#) kicked-off a large-scale participatory art, nature and history project at the 2012 Arte Americas Latin American Art Fair. The project is titled FLOR500 and, once complete, it will be a visual and physical portrayal of the landscape Ponce de León encountered when he first arrived.



The Office of Engaged Creativity is enlisting 500 Florida artists to depict 500 native wildflowers. These flowers were selected by a team of botanists and scientists to be sure that they are the same flowers Ponce de Leon encountered on his arrival. The end result will be a collection of 500 original art pieces that will be on permanent display on [FLOR500.com](#).

The project will also create 500 new native habitats by planting wildflower gardens in 500 schools across the State of Florida. A team of historians identified important figures in Florida's history and each garden will be dedicated to one of these Floridians, allowing students to learn about the state's ecological and historical legacy.

At the FLOR500 kick-off event at Arte Americas, fair-goers, artists and exhibitors, not only learned about the project, but were also encouraged to plant their own wildflower garden with seeds provided by the Florida Wildflower Foundation. FIU students prepared 500 packets containing the seeds and attached them to charcoal drawings by Xavier Cortada, director and artist-in-residence of the Office of Engaged Creativity. Participants were able to keep a piece of the original art in exchange for their promise to plant a wildflower garden.

This smaller-scale project is currently on display at the [Miami Beach Urban Studios](#) on Lincoln Road.

After a successful launch in South Florida, Cortada traveled to Tallahassee for an official wildflower planting ceremony at the Museum of Florida History hosted by Secretary of State Ken Detzner.

"The project is not only officially launched, but it is now on everybody's radar," said Cortada. "We are excited about FLOR500 and, like Ponce de Leon, are embarking on a journey only we are setting out to rediscover our own land."