

Wild in the country

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Nowhere is nature's "Yay!" more apparent than a good display of wildflowers. Seeds are splitting, shoots are shooting, buds are unfolding to show the colorful petals they've concealed. It's happening everywhere from your backyard and your neighborhood to national parks and foreign forests, plains, hillsides and tropical jungles.

Over the years, as habitat has dwindled and pollinating species have declined in numbers, wildflowers have been squeezed out and endangered. At the same time – maybe after a bit of a lag – groups across the country and the world have formed to protect and propagate species. Garden clubs and other organizations have invested major efforts to beautify roadways by planting wildflowers along their shoulders – nowadays some roads, such as Skyline Drive in Virginia and **U.S. 65 in the Florida Panhandle, have become official or unofficial wildflower-viewing routes.**

This roundup of top wildflower destinations is a hybrid list from a variety of sources.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

With more than 1,600 flowering species, it's earned the nickname Wildflower National Park. Variations in elevation, rainfall, temperature and geology contribute to that diversity of flowering plants – more than in any other North American national park. The show begins in February, with the "ephemerals" such as trillium, iris, little brown jugs and violets making brief appearances through mid-May; followed by extravagant displays of mountain laurel, rhododendron, azalea and other heath family shrubs flowering en masse through July, with aster, goldenrod and Joe-Pye weed up to 10 feet tall lasting through the fall.

When: Late winter to late fall.

- Hed here
- The U.S. Forest Service provides lots of information on wildflowers, including a "Wildflower Viewing Areas" list: www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers
- Another great source: Bob Gibbons' "Wildflower Wonders: The 50 Best Wildflower Sites in the World" (Princeton University Press, \$27.95).

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Details: www.nps.gov/grsm, www.greatsmokies.com.

Skyline Drive, Virginia

This 105-mile route goes through Shenandoah National Park, which contains more than 860 species of wildflowers. You can see a lot of them right from the road.

When: The violets started coming out in late March; by May, pink azaleas appear throughout the forest, followed in early June by the white flowers of mountain laurel. Summer is when columbine, milkweed, nodding onion and ox eye daisy bloom, along with touch-me-nots along streams and near springs. In fall, the blooming concludes with no-less-spectacular shows of goldenrods, asters and wild sunflowers.

When: Skyline Drive and the Big Meadows are best bets for summer and fall shows of color; early in the season, the banks of South, Hughes and Rose Rivers, as well as Mill Prong – all in the lower elevations of the park – are prime areas to see the floral diversity.

Details: www.nps.gov/shen.

George Washington Memorial Parkway, Maryland and Virginia

The GWMP, designed by the Bureau of Public Roads and completed in 1932, was the first road project to have a full-time landscape architect. The parkway, part of the national park system, runs from the Great Falls of the Potomac through D.C. to Mount Vernon, linking memorials, historic landmarks and native habitats, the latter featuring 591 species of wildflowers.

When: Throughout the spring. Dyke Marsh, on the shores of the Potomac River near the southern end of the Parkway, is one of the park service's largest tidal marsh areas, and features cattails, arrow arum, sweet flag, yellow bullhead lily jewelweed, river bullrush and wild rice.

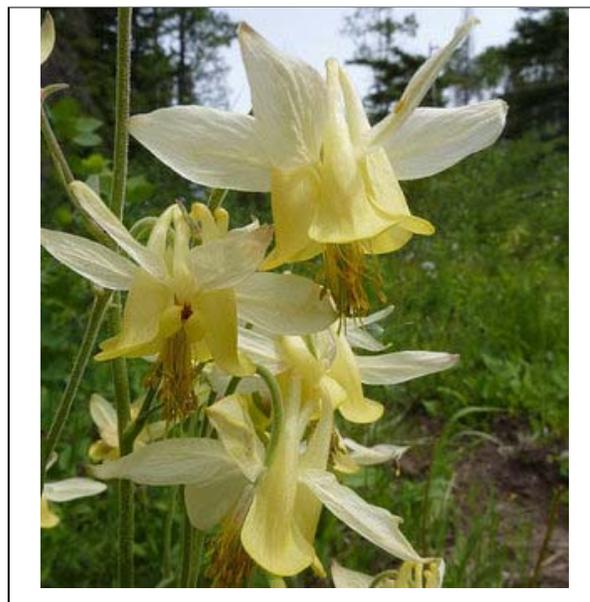
Details: www.nps.gov/gwmp.

White Mountains, New Hampshire

Easily accessible with breathtaking displays of hundreds of species of wildflowers, from orchids to purple lupine, progressing through spring and summer. Adding to the color are the butterflies attracted to the flora. Even into early summer, the fields of flowers may be framed by a backdrop of mountains still frosted in snow.

When: Beginning in late May with orchids, June for displays of blue and purple lupines. The 19th annual Fields of Lupine Festival, June 1-17 this year, includes events, tours and photo ops in Franconia, Easton, Sugar Hill, Bethlehem, Littleton and Lisbon.

Details: www.franconianotch.org.



Florida Panhandle

Natural conditions, along with some human intervention, have helped make Liberty County in the panhandle the best place in the state to view native wildflowers. Florida's garden clubs led the way in beautifying roadways with wildflowers in the 1930s. In the 1960s, the Florida Department of Transportation joined the effort; it is now planting wildflowers and maintaining natural populations along hundreds of miles of federal and state highways. State Route 65 from Telogia to Sumatra is prime viewing area.

When: Spring and fall. In particular: A 26.5 mile stretch of SR 65 has been designated the Panhandle Wildflower Route from Sumatra to Telogia and covers land within the Apalachicola National Forest. It features 250-plus native species, Download a route map from the Florida Wildflower Foundation site.

Details: www.flawildflowers.org.

Mount Rainier, Washington

At 14,410 feet above sea level, Rainier is the tallest mountain in the Cascade Range. The national park encompasses 235,625 acres on the west side of the range, and because of its elevation, offers a variety of habitats, providing an amazing variety of wildflower displays. In a single-day hike, you can see the very best of the flowers of the forest, subalpine and alpine zones.

When: Starts mid-July; most impressive shows by the beginning of August. In particular: The Paradise section of the park is famous for its glorious views and wildflower meadows; try the Alta Vista Trail for amazing views; Skyline Trail to Myrtle Falls also offers a wealth of wildflowers and is wheelchair accessible with assistance. Spray Park Trail has as many flowers as Paradise, but far fewer visitors.

Details: www.nps.gov/mora; www.flowersofrainier.com.

Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta

Known as the Wildflower Capital of Canada, the park is at the convergence of ecosystems from north, south, east and west, at the narrowest point in the Rocky Mountain chain. Waterton also has an unusually high number of rare plants – more than 175 are provincially rare, including mountain lady's slipper, pygmy poppy, mountain hollyhock; more than 20 species are found only in the Waterton area This vast ecosystem not only features wildflower displays in the mountains, but in grasslands, too.

When: Mid-May to July. The ninth annual Waterton Wildflower Festival is June 16-24 (www.watertonwildflowers.com).

Details: www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/waterton/index.aspx.

Bruce Peninsula National Park, Ontario

The northern Bruce Peninsula is home to two national parks and is at the heart of the Niagara Escarpment World Biosphere Reserve. The peninsula is known for its wide variety of wildflowers, thanks to its diversity of habitats in a relatively small area. Most notable are the wild orchids – 43 or 44 species, by last count. Other notables include globally rare species such as lakeside daisy and dwarf lake iris. Also notable: its diversity of ferns (about 36 species) and ancient cedars – some 500 years old – grow on the cliff faces and alvars (limestone barrens).

In particular: The annual Bruce Peninsula Orchid Festival, June 1-2, is based in the town of Tobermory (www.orchidfest.ca).

When: Spring, summer and early fall to see the full range of species.

Details: www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/on/bruce/index.aspx.



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