Spring comes early, and so do wildflowers by Jeff Norcini

Florida’s 2012 spring wildflower bloom is bountiful and early in the Panhandle, thanks to a wet, warm winter. Other areas of the state, however, probably won’t be able to match the Panhandle’s spectacular displays due to lack of winter rain, with the unseasonably warm weather making soil even drier.

The Panhandle’s rain and abnormally warm weather prompted the early emergence of both wildflower seedlings and perennials. Expect wildflowers to bloom earlier in other parts of Florida, too, especially in sunny, moist areas — ditches and swales, moist prairies, and edges of streams, lakes and ponds.

Along roadsides, wildflower viewing generally is best in rural areas with wide shoulders and bright light. The turf is often less manicured, which encourages natural vegetation, including native wildflowers.

In moist areas throughout much of the state, violets (Viola spp.) and white Rain lilies (Zephyranthes spp.) started to bloom in February, followed by blue Prairie iris (Iris hexagona), and buttery Southeastern sneezeweed (Helenium pinnatifidum). Other common native species found throughout Florida in moist areas are Leavenworth’s tickseed (Coreopsis leavenworthii) and Black-eyed Susan (Rudbeckia hirta), although in the Panhandle Black-eyed Susan tends to occur in drier habitats than in Central and South Florida.

Annual phlox (Phlox drummondii)*, with its showy flowers ranging from pink to purple, is blooming as far north as Gainesville. It puts on a good show every year regardless of dry or wet weather. Phlox is a familiar roadside wildflower throughout the Big Bend and as far south as Tampa, including along Interstate 75. Despite the anticipated dry weather this spring, expect to see swaths of Goldenmane tickseed (Coreopsis basalis)* adorning North Florida’s roadsides and fields in May.

When you are out and about and enjoying Mother Nature’s spring beauty, please don’t pick wildflowers. If you want to preserve the memory of a wildflower, take a picture — it will last longer. Many of our native wildflowers reproduce only by seed. Picking a flower reduces the ability of that plant to reproduce and for that population of wildflowers to sustain itself.

If you want to pick wildflowers, plant some in your yard or in containers on your patio or porch. Wildflower seed packets are available from the Florida Wildflower Seed and Plant Growers Association. Visit www.floridawildflowers.com for seed packet availability and ordering. Seed packets of Florida native wildflowers also may be available at garden centers specializing in Florida native plants. To find a native garden center near you, visit the Florida Association of Native Nurseries’ Website (http://www.plantrealflorida.org).

For specific locations in which to view wildflowers, the Florida Wildflower Foundation recommends these routes (download maps at www.FlaWildflowers.org/research.php):
- Panhandle Wildflower Route: Liberty County, which includes SR 65 from Telogia to Sumatra, continues to be the (continued on page 4)
Lessons from Leopold: the language of nature

Aldo Leopold is considered by many to be the father of modern ecology, but he was more than an outdoor enthusiast. He was a wise philosopher, inspiring educator, and outspoken environmental activist long before the label of environmentalism. Leopold was also an eloquent writer; his posthumously published A Sand County Almanac combines beautiful narratives of natural experiences and observations with a highly charged and ethical argument for conservation and stewardship.

Leopold’s tenet — what he called a “land ethic” — expanded the concept of “land” to include the whole of the biotic community, “the soils, waters, plants, and animals,” and placed man in the role of fellow-member. Through careful observation, he witnessed the interconnectedness between man, his actions and nature, and argued that the animals, land and other natural “resources” are not just commodities, but have their own value beyond human economics.

Leopold understood that it is not enough to simply know that nature exists; it is important to experience it in order that we may appreciate and understand our place within it. “Once you learn to read the land,” Leopold wrote, “I have no fear of what you will do to it, or with it. And I know many pleasant things it will do to you.”

As a young boy, Leopold immersed himself in the natural world, spending hours at a time observing the interactions between plants and animals, sketching plant parts with intricate detail, and writing about the sounds, smells and sights he encountered. Through a lifetime of experiences — tramping around the countryside, seeing the “fierce green fire” in the eyes of a dying wolf, sawing a lightning-struck oak for firewood on his Sauk County property — he came to understand the language of nature, learning to read the story “spelled out” by the “alphabet of ‘natural objects’ — the soils and rivers, birds and beasts.”

By immersing ourselves in nature, by sitting quietly and just observing as Leopold often did, we can discover much about the natural world — and even more about ourselves. When we take our place as fellow-members, as caretakers and not conquerors of the land, we, too, will begin to see the natural world “as a community to which we belong.”

For more information on Aldo Leopold, visit the Aldo Leopold Foundation’s Web site at www.AldoLeopold.org.

Plant Profile

**Prairie iris** (*Iris hexagona*)

Prairie iris is an excellent plant for water features, lake edges and small ponds. The petals of its showy flowers measure up to five inches long. Spring flowers don’t last long, but their beauty makes the plant well worth adding to a garden pond or lake edge. Its attractive, erect leaves are sword-like, standing 2- to 3-feet high.

**Native range:** North, Central and Southwest Florida in swamps, wet prairies and marshes, and along the edges of rivers, ponds and lakes.

**Exposure:** Full sun to part shade.

**Culture:** Damp to wet rich soil.

**Learn more:** Florida’s Best Native Landscape Plants (Gil Nelson, University Press of Florida — purchase online: www.FlaWildflowers.org/learn.php); www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

**Find a native-plant nursery:** www.PlantRealFlorida.org.
Great wildflowers for your dry landscape by Claudia Larsen

If you have added wildflowers to your landscape, you’ve probably learned how adaptable they are to a wide range of environmental conditions. Although it is a challenge to introduce wildflowers to a dry site, many species will adapt and flourish once established. According to the Florida Native Plant Society Suncoast Chapter’s landscape manual The Right Plants for Dry Places, all Florida counties from Levy, Marion and Volusia south to Broward County are considered dry. Other counties have many dry areas where development has traditionally occurred. Typically, your landscape qualifies as “dry” if puddles disappear within a few minutes after a heavy rain.

Some wildflowers prefer 8 to 10 hours of full sun per day and thrive in the heat. The best examples are found on beaches, but these plants can also be used inland to fill large beds with continuous color from summer through fall.

**Beach Sunflower** (*Helianthus debilis*) – Succulent green leaves support bright yellow 2-inch flowers on a plant that covers a 3- to 4-foot area. Although it spreads, this plant varies in height from 6 to 18 inches, depending on the source of seeds. It will reseed dependably in Central and South Florida.

**Blanketflower** (*Gaillardia pulchella*) – Light grey-green narrow leaves create a soft background for bright 3-inch, yellow and red flowers that float 10 to 18 inches above the ground, forming a mass display. Love this one because it proliferates each year from previous year’s seeds.

Both species respond to late-summer pruning that renews foliage and flowers, which last until cold weather.

Plants whose habitats are open sunny areas in sandhills or flatwoods can make a nice addition to your landscape while being drought-tolerant. These plants typically bloom for three to six weeks, so combining several species will ensure longer blooming and an interesting diversity. There are many species that fit here—here are just a few of my favorites:

**Greeneyes** (*Berlandiera spp.*) – This member of the aster family is one of the earliest plants to bloom in my North Central Florida garden in spring. Flowers occur in single heads with yellow ray flowers radiating around the central green disc or “eye,” giving the plant its nickname. Greeneyes grows 1 to 2 feet high and may bloom intermittently throughout the summer and fall in South Florida. Its long taproots contribute to its ability to thrive in dry locations.

**White Beardtongue** (*Penstemon multiflorus*) – This member of the snapdragon family has white flowers on terminal panicles that are supported above lance-shaped basal leaves in a clumping rosette. This summer bloomer may also attract hummingbirds. It makes striking statement when planted in groups of five or more.

**Milkweed** (*Asclepias tuberosa*) – We all love orange milkweed for its ability to attract Monarch and Queen butterflies, but it is also valuable as a long-blooming garden plant for dry sites. Each flower cluster consists of many small orange flowers with downward-curving petals. Although evergreen in South Florida, the long taproot assists in its drought durability and stores energy for its perennial reappearance each year in other parts of the state.

**Bluecurls** (*Trichostema dichotomum*) – Bluecurls forms a mist of light blue with its delicate airy appearance of small flowers with long feathery, curved stamens on a 1- to 3-foot plant. It is a short-lived perennial that blooms in late summer but will reseed prolifically if the soil below is unmulched. This member of the mint family is popular with bees and small butterflies.

**Paintbrush** (*Carphephorus corymbosus*) – Dry pinelands are where you will find this beauty in the fall. It is a lovely companion plant for clumping grasses such as Lovegrass and Lopsided Indian Grass. Thick, leathery basal leaves grow in a rosette and gradually form larger clumps. The 18- to 30-inch single flower stalks have flat-topped inflorescences studded with bright purple-pink disk flowers.

**Goldenaster** (*Pityopsis graminifolia*) – If you are lucky to have gopher tortoises on your property, you may already have Goldenaster growing as its food source. This colony-forming plant spreads by underground stems and has nice silvery, lance-shaped foliage that makes a low groundcover. In fall, 1- to 3-foot spikes of bright yellow, half-inch flowers appear on multi-branched stems.

We consider sunny landscapes as dry, but partial and full-shade landscapes also can qualify. They can be difficult to landscape with wildflowers because they tend to be more open in nature and may have natural leaf mulch. Try these species:

**False Petunia** (*Ruellia caroliniana*) – This low growing plant might spread too much in fertile moist soil, but it is easily controlled in dry, shady locations. The light-blue petunia-shaped flowers create a cooling effect under dappled shade of oaks. (False petunia also grows well in full sun, where it forms a compact 8- to 10-inch mound that blooms throughout summer.)

**Frostweed or White Crownbeard** (*Verbena virginica*) – The Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville recommends this little-known plant as a pollinator magnet. Frostweed’s natural habitat is shady hammocks, where it grows to 3 to 4 feet, but it does well in sunnier locations, too. The flowers are a cluster of white with green central discs. The large, coarse, scapled leaves may be more adapted to the background in a bed or a forest-edge planting where it can form colonies.

All these wildflowers can be grown throughout Florida. Even with drought-tolerant plantings, remember that your garden may need supplemental water during prolonged times without rain. If plants look wilted and do not recover overnight, an application of one-half to three-quarter inches of water will renew vigor. Some perennials go dormant in the heat of summer, dying back to roots waiting for cooler fall or winter weather, when they will produce fresh leaves. Light mulching can help reduce evaportranspiration and reduce wilting.

By finding which plants are best suited to your dry areas, you can concentrate them in your plantings and create a great visual display that you can enjoy rain or shine!

Claudia Larsen owns and operates Micanopy Wildflowers, a native-plant nursery in Micanopy.
Welcome new members

(r) – renewal

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Guide to Eastern Panhandle wildflowers now available

The Panhandle is widely considered to be the best place in Florida to view native wildflowers. Now, visitors and residents can easily find the best sites with a new guide available at Florida Welcome Centers, regional visitor centers, and chambers of commerce.

The pamphlet features viewing routes developed by Drs. Gil Nelson and Jeff Norcini, a brief history of wildflowers, tips for best viewing, and Nelson’s beautiful photos and descriptions of 40 of the region’s most common native flowers.

Support for the project was provided by VISIT FLORIDA, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and funds from State Wildflower license plate sales.

To request a copy, send your name and address along with a check or money order for $5 (shipping and handling) to: Panhandle Brochure, c/o Florida Wildflower Foundation, PO Box 941066, Maitland, FL 32751. To request a copy online, visit www.FlaWildflowers.org/membership.php.

Join a movement that’s growing like wildflowers!

Over the last decade, our members have raised more than $2.6 million for Florida’s native wildflowers and grasses through their membership dues and donations made through the State Wildflower license plate. By doing so, they’ve helped seed highways, fund community plantings, create educational materials, support important research projects, and much more.

By becoming a Florida Wildflower Foundation member, you can join the fight to preserve and conserve Florida’s native wildflowers, too. To join, use the convenience of PayPal online at www.FlaWildflowers.org/membership.php or snap out this membership coupon to send with a check. Got a Florida State Wildflower license plate? Your membership is free!

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Please make check payable to Florida Wildflower Foundation Inc.

Send to:
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P.O. Box 941066
Maitland, FL 32794-1066
or visit www.FlaWildflowers.org/membership.php

Show your Flower Power — get the plate!

Best place in Florida to view native wildflowers. A brochure featuring eastern Panhandle viewing areas, as well as photos of common wildflowers, will soon be available at Panhandle state welcome centers, chambers of commerce, and regional visitor centers.

• St. Johns River to the Sea Bike Loop: Volusia, Brevard, Flagler, Putnam, and St. Johns counties.
• Big Bend Wildflower Route: Dixie, Gilchrist, Lafayette, Levy, Suwannee, and Taylor counties.
• Corkscrew Swamp Vicinity Wildflower Route: Collier, Hendry and Lee counties.* Nativty of Coreopsis basalis and Phlox drummoundii are debatable.

(Spring... continued from page 1)