



Chris Grossenbacher, a Florida's Turnpike consultant, is surrounded by black-eyed Susans growing wild near the Canoe Creek Plaza rest stop in Osceola County. (George Skene, Orlando Sentinel/June 10, 2009)

## **Flower power is poised for a showy comeback along Florida roads**

By Kevin Spear  
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June 13, 2009 – For decades, the state has had a fondness for nurturing wildflowers at the edges of big byways and rural routes.

It was motivated by appreciation for scenic beauty in dreary places and, to a degree, jealousy over hordes of tourists lured to the famed and dazzling floral displays that border Texas blacktops.

But now there are new and pressing reasons to dapple the shoulders of Florida roads with black-eyed Susans, phlox, tickseed, which is the state wildflower, and even rare orchids that are sprouting near Orlando.

Governments are strapped for cash. Road managers say one way to cut costs is to reduce roadside mowing, which often means showtime for wild blossoms.

Worries about soaring fuel prices and shrinking green spaces also are good reasons to embrace the lower maintenance and natural qualities of roadside flowers, said wildflower grower Terry Zinn of Alachua County.

And don't forget safety, he said.

"People aren't aware of their environment after driving on the interstate for a while. Troopers call it the

zone," said Zinn, a former attorney with the state Department of Transportation. "Wildflowers break that up. Studies show that people slow down and are more attentive."

The direct cost of mowing state roads is nearly \$10 million, with millions more in costs built into large maintenance contracts. The result of mowing up to 10 times a year is an endless and monochromatic carpet of Bahia grass, the top choice of road builders.

"I'm not sure the state of Florida can live up to that expectation any longer," said Jeff Caster, DOT landscape architect in Tallahassee.

Agency officials are starting to experiment with cutting back on mowing to bring on a bloom. Although the agency regularly plants wildflower seeds — 3,500 pounds in 24 varieties last year — DOT officials don't have much expertise in how to best nurture what grows, Caster said.

The DOT has carved out test tracts along North Florida roads where mowers will be kept at bay to see what happens with road safety, maintenance and wildflower growth. Results could help state transportation officials calculate mowing reductions elsewhere.

A downside with wildflowers is that after they bloom and go to seed, they can look like weeds.

"It's a very different aesthetic," Caster said. "But I think people are ready for it."

Also to be figured out is what plants grow best in different parts of the state. Wildflowers and north Lake County roads, for example, make for a botanical garden.

In Brevard County "we can hardly get even grass to grow over there," said Mike Wright, a DOT roadway administrator.

One promising flower bed is 312 miles long — [Florida's Turnpike](#) — where gardening efforts began three years ago at the north end of the toll road and are expanding south.

Contract manager Chris Grossenbacher, a consultant to the DOT, said that not mowing during spring and fall blooms and especially not during the seeding phase has resulted in an explosion of naturally occurring wildflowers.

"It's just the right thing to do rather than perpetuate Bahia turf grass," Grossenbacher said.

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