When Ponce de Leon traveled in Florida five hundred years ago, he named it the ‘Land of Flowers’. What a colorful sight those native wildflowers must have been for those early visitors. The Florida Department of Transportation has made it possible for visitors and Floridians to enjoy the beauty of those wildflowers, also, while traveling around Florida’s highways and byways.

The roadside right-of-way wildflower program actually had its humble beginnings in 1963. As the story goes, pasture grass that was heavily seeded with crimson clover was used to sod a roadway project near Tallahassee. The public was so enamored with the blooming clover along the road that the idea of roadside flowers began to form.

One purpose of the wildflower program is ‘the conservation and protection of Florida’s natural resources and scenic beauty’. Besides being absolutely beautiful, the colorful sights are believed to improve safety on the highways by increasing driver alertness. Stands of wildflowers don’t need to be mowed as often as grass, so there is an economic benefit due to lower maintenance costs. Sounds like we win-win.

Where did these lovely roadside native wildflowers come from? Many of the plants that you see were naturally occurring wildflowers that have been very well managed by specialists. With the use of proper management practices such as timely mowing, natural wildflower populations have been preserved and even expanded. In addition, some native wildflower seeds are obtained from Florida sources and are planted.

The most colorful road displays in North Florida are from late April into June. The environments around the state are different, but some wildflowers can be found throughout Florida. Some to watch for this spring are coreopsis, pink and purple annual phlox, blanket flower and black-eyed Susan. You may see blue-eyed grass, which is not really a grass at all, but a relative of the garden iris.

Coreopsis, our state wildflower, is even popular in home gardens. There are fifteen Coreopsis species that grow in Florida, and they are all bright yellow except for the pink swamp coreopsis. Most coreopsis, or tickseed, which grow along our roads, are Leavenworth’s tickseed or lanceleaf tickseed. Lanceleaf tickseed is short and has a totally yellow flower. Leavenworth’s tickseed grows taller and has a yellow flower with a brownish center.

According to the Florida Wildflower Foundation site www.floridawildflowerfoundation.org this is going to be a great year for wildflower displays. El Nino brought us extra rain and a cool winter, both of which help with germinating our spring and fall flowers. So that nasty winter was good for something.

Should you pick the wildflowers along the road? Picking wildflowers reduces the amount of seed that sustains the plant population. Also, stopping along the road can be dangerous to you and passing motorists. Why not plant an area of wild flowers at home? To find seeds right for your area go www.floridawildflowers.com