

Our State

NORTH CAROLINA

Roadside Flowers

By Josh Shaffer

Photography by Joey and Jessica Seawell

The Department of Transportation's wildflower program brings back-road scenery to North Carolina's busiest highways.



Multicolored wildflowers catch the eyes of motorists traveling down U.S. Highways 52 near Rural Hall

Little of beauty shows up on the side of a highway.

It's where cars break down. It's where hitchhikers stand. It's where litterbugs toss drink cans and cigarette butts.

There's nothing much to see but a gas station sign on a pole, a shredded tire from a tractor-trailer, or the remains of an unlucky deer.

Nobody fusses much about these places, places we pass in a hurry on the way to somewhere prettier.

But for 27 years, North Carolina has persisted with the stubborn idea that those humdrum strips of road should offer some reward beyond six lanes and reflective highway markers.

A driver crossing the state on Interstate 40 should see more than asphalt and weeds between Wilmington and Asheville. The hot, flat ribbons linking Raleigh and Charlotte ought to show off scenery more often found in meadows — the catchflies, the toadflax, the oxeye daisies. As a driver, the sudden flash of red from an acre of corn poppies ought to make you pull off on the roadside, stop the car, step over the bits of gravel and broken glass, and walk knee-deep into the blooms.

Even in this budget-slashing era, the North Carolina Department of Transportation still treats 1,500 acres of lowly roadside as the state's flower garden.

You find lanceleaf coreopsis on Exit 2 of Interstate 26 outside Asheville, dame's rocket in the median of Interstate 77 near Charlotte, and sweet William along N.C. Highway 11 in Hertford County.

"We soften the blow of what the concrete does to the landscape," says Don Lee, roadside environmental engineer for NCDOT. "There's an art to it."

All dressed up

In Raleigh, much of the NCDOT's work involves asphalt and concrete rather than fertilizer and wildflower seed. The bulk of the attention goes to managing a long list of requests for bigger, wider highways and divvying up construction money from the state's pot.

Most civil engineers excel at tearing up the ground, not tending it.

But in 1985, North Carolina first lady, Dottie Martin, began dressing up the state's roadways with help from tourism promoter Hugh Morton, who owned Grandfather Mountain.

She gained inspiration from Lady Bird Johnson, who lobbied for wildflower protection, handed out beautification awards, and wrote checks to the winners. Johnson's efforts soon saw bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes sprouting from the sides of Texas highways.

Purists in the horticultural world sometimes frown on North Carolina's program, which relies on imported seeds rather than native species. They call it misleading to sprinkle nonnative flowers across North Carolina and boast about natural beauty. Today, native plants make up only about a third of the plantings, and most seeds come from large wholesalers.

But the effort to spruce up something as bare as a highway also draws envious letters from other states, including one from the garden club of Michigan.

"One lady told me that any state that cared that much about wildflowers, she wanted to live there," says Nancy McLean, a Raleigh resident and member of the Garden Club of North Carolina.

The wildflower program's comparatively small budget, about \$1.5 million a year, keeps it going these days as the government trims other programs. Most of the money comes from the sale of vanity license plates.



When construction slows traffic on Interstate 40 near Clemmons, thousands of orange daylilies offer a visual diversion.

And the competitive spirit helps, too. The staff members of 14 NCDOT divisions statewide vie for annual bragging rights. In 2011, top honors went to division one, which stretches from Williamston to Nags Head. Members of the state garden club serve as judges. They pore over photographs of median strips and interchanges, looking for maintenance, proper growth, bloom longevity, and visibility.

"You look for wow factor," says club member Anne Clapp. "You look for, 'At 80 miles per hour, are you going to stop?'"

'Look at me'

Keep in mind, these flowers spring to life in soil meant to have concrete spread on top of it.

The land NCDOT tries to turn into the state's welcome mat comes from the bottom of a dredge pit. When the nutrient-starved earth arrives for testing, the lab technicians often ask, "Where did you find this stuff?"

Along the coast, NCDOT staff members sometimes give up on the sandiest soil and just plant longleaf pines.

Once they sow and fertilize the seeds, the plants are on their own. All workers can do then is pray for rain, and hope against hurricanes and tornadoes.

In the mountains, the soil is often too rocky to plant flowers, and big swaths of acreage are scarce. But tourists combing the Blue Ridge Parkway demand color.

“They may not come just for the flowers, but they expect them to be there,” says Richard Queen of NCDOT division 14, which covers the state’s western tip. “If they don’t turn out as good, we hear about it.”

One important strategy is juggling seeds to maximize showtime. A wildflower’s bloom lasts just a few weeks, and the rest of the year, it looks like a weed.

So you plant them in shifts.

On the coast, workers run a seasonal rotation: first a mix of oxeye daisies and coreopsis, then white and yellow daisies, then brown-eyed Susans — three different blooms all in the same patch of ground.

If it’s horticultural engineering, so be it. It’s nice. It’s nostalgic.



Ken Taffer and Don Lee, with NCDOT, examine a bed of rocket larkspur off N.C. Highway 68 in Greensboro

Don Lee started in the wildflower program near the beginning of his NCDOT career, and he admits that at first, he didn’t get it. But now he receives calls from corporate bosses requesting wildflower plots on the interchanges outside their headquarters because they know that the flowers impress high-dollar visitors.

“They get off at the airport and say, ‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’” he says.

Tourists also call and ask for the most flower-heavy routes, so NCDOT lists them online, letting a driver track them county by county, highway by highway.

But Lee is most impressed by how many people voluntarily send money, without being asked, to support a state government program.

“We get checks in the mail all the time,” he says. “Checks!”

It takes a tough plant to make it in the state’s toughest dirt, a spirited flower that doesn’t mind heat, notice thirst, or wither from constant exhaust and truck noise.

It takes a special flower to shout, “Look at me!” from a stage as unflattering as the side of a highway, and an uncommon state to sow beauty in a landscape of litter.

Josh Shaffer is an award-winning writer for The News & Observer in Raleigh. His most recent story for Our State was about the North Carolina State University Vet School (March 2012).

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The NCDOT keeps detailed records of plantings and blooming times. Visit [ncdot.org](https://www.ncdot.org) for more information.

Western Wildflowers

Buncombe County

Interstate 40 (Exit 37)

Mixed Corn Poppy, Oxeye Daisy

Clay County

U.S. Highway 64

Oxeye Daisy, Red Corn Poppy, Catchfly

Haywood County

Interstate 40 (Exit 27)

Oxeye Daisy, Red Corn Poppy

Henderson County

Interstate 26

Oxeye Daisy, Coreopsis

Piedmont Wildflowers

Catawba County

Interstate 40

Toadflax, California Poppy

Davidson County

Interstate 85 and U.S. Highway 64

Sweet William, Nodding Catchfly

Durham County

U.S. Highway 501

Mixed Corn Poppy, Pink Catchfly, Lanceleaf Coreopsis

Iredell County

Interstate 77

Lanceleaf Coreopsis, Red Corn Poppy

Scotland County

U.S. Highway 74

Oxeye Daisy, California Poppy

Eastern Wildflowers

Bertie County

U.S. Highway 13/17

Mixed Corn Poppy, White Clover, Pink Catchfly

Carteret County

N.C. Highway 24 and N.C. Highway 58 Interchange

Mixed Corn Poppy, Toadflax, Red Corn Poppy

Dare County

U.S. Highway 264

Red Corn Poppy, Pink Catchfly

Duplin County

U.S. Highway 117 and N.C. Highway 50

Lanceleaf Coreopsis

Granville County

Interstate 85 at U.S. Highway 158

Lanceleaf Coreopsis

Sampson County

Interstate 40 East (Mile Marker 355)

Lanceleaf Coreopsis

Wayne County

U.S. Highway 117 and U.S. Highway 70

Lanceleaf Coreopsis

Wake County

U.S. 264 East (before N.C. Highway 39)

California Poppy

Wilson County

Interstate 95 and U.S. Highway 301

Lanceleaf Coreopsis