Wildflowers are not just pretty; they provide many benefits

By: Corine Burgess

Spring is just around the corner and soon wildflowers will be popping up all over. Florida has many varieties of the colorful blossoms that range in size, color and shape. In fact, when Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon sighted land, which happened to be what we now call Florida, he deemed it La Florida, which means “land of flowers.”

But what exactly is a wildflower? According to the Florida Wildflower foundation, wildflowers are “any flowering herbaceous species, or woody species with ornamental flowers, which grew wild within the state’s natural ecosystems in the 1560s when Florida’s first botanical records were created.”

In order to understand why Florida is rich with wildflowers, it’s important to appreciate the nature of the land. Historically, fire played an important part in the sunshine state’s makeup. Lightning would strike and burn for miles uninterrupted. The flames reduce the fuel on the ground and prevent the forest from being taken over by other types of trees and plants, which is called succession.

Once fire has passed through an area, the nutrient cycle increases; soil pH is raised and nitrogen fixation is stimulated. Many seeds from wildflowers need the heat from the fire to break out of their shell. Others may remain dormant until they are burned. At first glance, it may appear that the fire has destroyed everything in its path. But if you could look underground, you would see that the roots and seeds have survived. Stimulated by the nutrients from the ash, heat and open spaces, wildflowers will begin to grow and increase flowering.

Another reason that wildflowers are so abundant is the fact that they are a food source to many animals. Herbivores such as rabbits, mice and deer eat the plants and disperse the seeds naturally. Insects play a part in the process as well. Birds eat the seeds or perhaps the bugs that visited the wildflowers and they help spread the seeds.

Wildflowers are also important nectar sources for many creatures. In fact, having these beautiful wildflowers in your yard will provide an attractive landscape as well as habitat for birds and insects, including butterflies.

Plants play a vital role on our planet. Many times taken for granted, plants such as wildflowers, serve humans and wildlife in many ways. How would the earth look if there were no plants? Forests, grasslands and swamps are filled with diverse vegetation which beautifies the land. Wildflowers are used in landscaping and beautifying highways and cities. Many varieties also make excellent picked flowers for a splash of color indoors or on the patio.

Plants provide many of the components of the medicines we use. In fact, approximately 80 percent of all medicinal drugs originate from wild plants. The Madagascar periwinkle provides vincristine, a substance which has increased the survival rate of children with leukemia. Taxol, which comes from the Pacific Yew, has been used to fight cancer. Many plants exist that provide invaluable ingredients for the world’s medicines.
Wildflowers provide food for humans as well as wildlife. Take the sunflower for example. The bright yellow and brown flower offers seeds, oil and other products we need. The banana yucca (*Yucca baccata*), which sports a very elaborate bloom, is used for food, medicine, fiber, and dye. Ninety percent of the world’s food comes from twenty plant species

Wildflowers help the air quality of our planet. Plants take in carbon dioxide and produce oxygen by a process called photosynthesis. Having plenty of vegetation around ensures that we have enough air to breathe and that it will be fairly filtered and clean.

The same is true with our water. Plants play an important role in the quality of our water. Plants filter water as it passes by and ensures that many of the pollutants are removed. Plants also increase water clarity by reducing erosion. With roots holding the soil in place, it is less likely to end up in the drink!

Even our weather is influenced by plants. Having lots of trees and plants including wildflowers in an area can moderate climates. Many of the horrendous historical droughts have been attributed to the fact that areas were devoid of vegetation especially forests.

Wildflowers are more than just pretty! They serve humans and wildlife in so many important ways. These bright blooming plants make a great addition to your gardens. By planting wildflowers you will increase the plant and animal diversity in your neighborhood and help wildlife have a place to hide and stay.

Next time you see a field of wildflowers, enjoy the beauty they provide, but also remember that the medicine you take, the food you eat and the air you breathe are all benefits of the colorful plants!