Flowering Lawns

Photo by David Copps: Kids in a flowering lawn

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This past March, my young nephews came for a visit from New Mexico. Having been cooped up in their Albuquerque home over the cold winter, they were quite gleeful to run barefoot through my backyard here in Tallahassee. They particularly enjoyed picking small bouquets of wildflowers that were blooming in the dormant lawn. Their mother graciously accepted handful after handful – each one a custom mix of clover, oxalis, rain lily, vetch, blue-eyed grass, and spiderwort. They finally grew tired of this endeavor and went on to find another adventure somewhere else in my wild yard.

Before the influences of the golf course aesthetic and the industrial approach to lawn care, the experience of my nephews was commonplace. People had a more relaxed attitude toward grass and groundcovers. With infrequent cutting and little to no fertilizer and irrigation, communities of low plants knit together with lawn grasses to cover the ground. The mix of plants provides color and interest throughout the year and an important source of insects, seeds and nectar for wildlife.

The west lawn at Goodwood Museum and Gardens is a good example of this low maintenance approach of times past. Here you can see a variety of small flowering plants mixed in with the thin lawn grasses in the dappled shade of large spreading live oaks. Some of my favorites are the low panicums, basket grass, violets, and partridgeberry. In September hurricane lilies pop up here and there to provide colorful accents. At Wakulla Springs State Park there are patches of flowering lawn that exist under the tall pines in and around the playground and picnic area. The feathery plumes of black-seeded needle grass, interspersed with Walter’s violet and lyre-leaf sage, put on a show in March and April. Roadsides throughout Florida exemplify the flowering lawn concept. Infrequent mowing allows a great number of wildflowers to exist within these tough bahia grass strips. While driving to Crawfordville last week, I saw countless patches of lance-leaf coreopsis, daisy fleabane, moss verbena, and showy evening primrose along Highway 319.
If you’re tired of mowing the same old boring patch of turf, why not convert some of it to flowering lawn. Mow it occasionally during the summer months with the mower blades set as high as they will go and see what develops in the fall and spring. Songbirds will thank you as they pluck insects and spiders out of these productive patches to feed their hungry nestlings. And don’t be surprised if a small child discovers your little meadow and offers you a fresh-picked bouquet of your very own.

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