Wildflowers

By Jan Brick
Certified Master Gardener

They have appeared in abundance across Galveston Island from the east end to the far west end on roadways, in abandoned yards, city lots, cemeteries, pastures and even homemaker's gardens.

Did they float along on the waters and winds of Hurricane Ike? Did they settle and nestle into the soil awaiting the warmth of the spring?

Did they awaken, sprout, flourish and bloom simply for our pleasure? Did they come to lift our spirits? They certainly did! How lovely!

My article "Buttercups By the Bay" published in the March issue of The Islander Magazine featured the anticipated appearance of wildflowers that had been sown by the Texas Department of Transportation after an extensive rehabilitation of the roadside, median and ditches along FM 3005 on the west end of the island.

We expected to see the Indian Paint-brush, an upright annual or perennial herb native to Texas. The red-orange flower color is a trick-of-the-eye misconception — it is actually a tiny creamy whitish-yellow bloom encircled by the red-orange leaf-like bracts.

Expected also to bloom was the Oxeye Daisy, a typical meadow plant that thrive in a variety of locations such as dry fields and roadside ditches. (The game "He loves me, he loves me not", is associated with this flower).

We have seen in bloom the Primrose Buttercup (a cup shaped bloom with rose to pale pink flowers and a yellow or white center), the Coneflower (an annual herb with elongated leaves that clasp around the stem at the base with flowerheads that are similar in shape to black-eyed susans but are smaller and come in a large variety of colors) and the Cosmos...a great fast growing plant with brightly colored single or double flowers in white, pink, orange, yellow or scarlet.

Not only have we seen all of those beautiful blooms in great quantities but also we have taken great delight in the profusion of other wildflower blossoms. Among them are the thousands of beautiful Brown-eyed Susans, (Rudbeckia), a prairie species found throughout Texas. This is a stiffly upright perennial, growing one to three feet with blooms that will last several days when used as a cut-flower. It is said that the Indians used juice from the roots of Rudbeckia in the treatment of earaches.

Personally, I have enjoyed finding the common sunflower (Asteraceae) in the fields and pastures of the west end and then again in some front yards in the east end...sometimes growing to a height of ten feet, the common sunflower grows on a stout upright stalk ending with a huge yellow disk of a bloom. The common sunflower is "a most useful plant, formerly being of great value to Indians for medicines, as a source for fiber and cordage, and as a highly nutritious food."

Also a member of the sunflower family, the Indian Blanket (Gaillardia pulchella) has shown itself by the thousands. It is called by the common name "fire wheel" because of its appearance of an orange wheel with yellow rays at the tips.

Every year, I look forward to the perennial performance of the wild lantana. "Wild lantanas" are plants of the genus Abronia, usually called "sand-verbenas" or those of the Verbenaceae family that have naturalized all along the Gulf Coast. Blooming spring through summer and fall, the lantana is a favorite hangout for butterflies.

Lantana's aromatic flower clusters are a mix of red, orange and yellow. The flowers typically change color as they mature. One of my favorites is Lantana Camara or more commonly known as "Ham 'n Eggs" due to its pink and yellow inflorescences.

I hope that all of you have enjoyed Mother Nature's fancy spring show as much as I have. I needed it! And although it has seemed slower coming this year, I am looking forward to more "greening up" and the re-appearance of color all over the Island!

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It is time for the much-anticipated “Back-Yard Garden Tour” presented by Clean Galveston on the first weekend in June. This is one of the most eagerly anticipated tours of Galveston Island’s summer season. Each year, owners of estate-sized gardens, mini-sized gardens and gardens tucked along side and back fences open their gates to the public for two days and proudly display the results of endless hours of effort.

This tour has a scope as diversified as the gardeners for whom these gardens are a labor of love. There will be ample inspiration for us to carry home to our own gardens!

The Common Dandelion

Although we may prefer to think of the common dandelion as a weed and a nuisance, it is indeed a colorful wildflower and a member of the sunflower family. Blooming almost all year in yards everywhere, “the fruit of this plant is as familiar as the flowers. Numerous seeds with stalked, white feathery bristles at the tip are congested in a round feathery ball and readily fly away on the wind or the slightest breath when fully mature.” I have been told that dandelion greens have been used as a vegetable for years and the flowers will produce a “delightful golden wine”.

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