Wanderlust: Where to find the wildflowers in the Bay Area this spring

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Like clockwork, beautiful wildflowers are appearing along the sides of freeways, abandoned pastures and wild meadows.

Admittedly, they're a little tougher to find this year. Wildflowers like tough times; they evolved to endure severe arid conditions. This spring's rains offered an advantage to non-native annual grasses, which crowd out the natives.

But with a little effort, it's possible to find colorful floral displays. And you don't have to travel to far-flung locations -- Santa Clara, San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties offer plenty of local opportunities for spring blooms.

Santa Clara County

Joseph D. Grant County Park:

Check with the visitor's center to learn the best routes through oak grasslands, with checkerbloom, California poppy and lupine (www.parkhere.org, click on "Find a Park").

Monte Bello Open Space Preserve: Stevens Creek Nature Trail has informational placards sprinkled along the trail in both directions, enlightening trail users about flowers, animal tracks, the food chain and coyotes (www.openspace.org/preserves).

On May 30, from 8:45 a.m. to 1 p.m., naturalists will lead a 3.5-mile, leisurely paced walk through this less traveled section of the preserve on the Waterwheel Creek Trail. The hike will feature

some flowers, but also geology and history. Note: Participants will carpool to the trailhead -- so meet at the Picchetti Ranch Preserve parking lot. Reservations are required (www.openspace.

org/preserves).

Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve: Head uphill on the Ridge Trail. Bloom times are often later in Russian Ridge than other places because of the frequent cool, damp fogs that flow over the ridge, so this can stay lovely until late May (www.openspace.org/preserves).

On May 27, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., an eight-mile hike led by two naturalists follows the contours and colors of this marvelous ridge. Meet at the parking lot on the northwest corner of the Skyline Boulevard (Highway 35) and Page Mill/Alpine Road intersection (across Skyline on the right). Those driving from Interstate 280 on Page Mill Road should allow about 35 minutes of travel time.

Henry W. Coe State Park: Take the Hunting Hollow Trailhead for a 7.2-mile route through woods and meadows (www.coepark.org).

Santa Teresa County Park: Next to the park is the Stile Ranch Trail, a 1.4-mile footpath that traverses rocky soil on low hills on IBM's Almaden research property (www.parkhere.org, click on "Find a Park").

Rancho Cañada del Oro Open Space Preserve in south Santa Clara County (www.openspaceauthority.org).

On May 24, at 9 a.m., a naturalist leads a "Wings and Bling" hike along the Longwall Canyon Trail in search of flowers and butterflies. Families welcome. Meet at the parking lot.

Mount Madonna County Park in Gilroy (www.parkhere.org, click on "Find a Park").

On May 22, the Santa Clara County chapter of the California Native Plant Society will lead a field trip to explore the diverse habitats of Mount Madonna, a 3,688-acre park that features redwood forests, oak woodlands, chaparral and grasslands, as well as four species of manzanita. Hikers will visit the serpentine area on the Merry Go Round Trail.

The hike will be moderately strenuous, up to six miles and up to 1,200 feet of elevation gain/loss. For more information and to sign up, contact Judy Fenerty at judy@fenerty.com or 408-378-6272. Directions will be sent before the hike.

San Mateo County

Edgewood Park and Preserve: Edgewood's serpentine grasslands are renowned for their lush wildflower carpets and rich biodiversity. You might see dozens of species of flowers on a single walk. Combine legs of the Serpentine Loop, Ridgewood Loop and/or Sylvan Loop for a hike from two to four miles (www.co.sanmateo.ca.us/portal/site/parks).

Every Saturday and Sunday through June 5, free walks begin at 10 a.m. and end around 1 p.m. They start from the Education Center at the Old Stage Day Camp (www.friendsofedgewood.org/docent_walks_2011).

Coal Mine Ridge: This Portola Valley spot is privately owned, but there's a public easement. Start at the Alpine Trail and follow a 3.1-mile easy loop. As the trail ascends through woods and oak grassland along the Old Spanish Trail, you'll see bright pink clarkia -- a cheerful late spring sight (www.bahiker.com/southbayhikes/cmr).

Sweeney Ridge: Between San Bruno and Pacifica, spring wildflowers can be seen in the coastal scrub along the Sneath Lane Trail (www.parksconservancy.org/visit/park-sites/sweeney-ridge).

Pulgas Ridge Open Space Preserve: After a level and routine 0.6-mile stretch, bear off right onto the Polly Geraci Trail.

Even in early June, flowers can be found, such as golden brodiaea, pitcher sage and scattered Indian pinks (www.openspace.org/preserves).

Santa Cruz County

Rancho del Oso's Waddell Creek: Any day is lovely to explore these coastal creekside meadows of this lesser-known park.

For a 14-mile guided hike to the park's three waterfalls, join a naturalist 10 a.m. May 22 at the ranger station. He goes slowly, has an extensive knowledge of natural and human history, and is very personable. Call the nature and history center at 831-427-2288 to reserve or just show up with lunch, water and energy (www.ranchodeloso.org).

Wilder Ranch State Park: This park has the most abundant and reliable displays of yellow brodiaea and golden Mariposa lilies. To find them, walk from the parking lot through the farm interpretive center, and through the tunnel that goes north under the highway (www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=549).

Need help with identification? One of the most comprehensive guides to help with identification is "Introduction to California Spring Wildflowers of the Foothills, Valleys, and Coast," revised edition, by Philip A. Munz, edited by Dianne Lake and Phyllis M. Faber (University of California Press, 2004, 302 pages, $16.95). To find the book, visit www.ucpress.edu.

Want to learn more? Annual membership to the California Native Plant Society, which conducts year-round field trips and offers educational talks, is $ 45. Contact the society at 3921 E. Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303, or email ray.deutsch@yahoo.