

Carolina Highways

By Bob Cairns
What gives travelers their first impression of North Carolina?

For many of the millions of visitors who pass through the state, it's 76,000 miles of North Carolina state maintained highway—one of the largest and best kept road systems in the United States.

And according to Dr. Joseph M. DiPaola, a N. C. State University assistant professor of crop science, there is more to well-maintained roadside vegetation than meets the traveler's eye.

"Driver safety, erosion control, noise and heat reduction, cleaner air, and glare control all come with a well-maintained, properly vegetated right-of-way," he said. "Also, many a life has been saved by a purposely placed grassy median or by the soft cushion of a bank covered with vegetation."

But the luxury of having some of the nation's best landscaped highways doesn't come cheaply.

"North Carolina is now mowing more than 230,000 acres of highway land at an annual cost that exceeds \$8-million," DiPaola said. "The service is essential to our well-being and safety, but costs must be reduced."

In an effort to cut the expense of maintaining state roadsides, DiPaola and Dr. William B. Gilbert, an NCSU professor of crop science, are cooperating in a research project with the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

A \$200,000 state- and federally-funded five-year grant administered by the North Carolina Institute for Transportation Research and Education, located in Research Triangle Park, is making the research possible.

The investigators are studying plant adaptation; low maintenance grasses; the use of plant growth regulators to reduce mowing requirements; and are developing a computerized mapping system to help place plants in proper growing environments.

"The primary thrust of our research is to reduce the state's maintenance cost by selecting better adapted plants for use as roadside vegetation, and by slowing growth rates of plant materials already in use," DiPaola said.

North Carolina's environment is a diverse one, so the researchers have established nursery test facilities at 17 locations across the state to test plants in varied settings.

Many plants, including grasses and legumes, are being tested for adaptability to weather and various soil types.

He explained that because of its tolerance to heat and cold, tall fescue is still the state's mainstay among roadside grasses.

"Tall fescue is still used along 80 per cent of our roadways, but due to environmental stresses in some locations and physical factors such as gullies and slopes, that plant is not always suitable. Other slow-growing grasses and plants like lespedezas, maximilian sunflowers and sumac are proving useful in areas where tall fescue doesn't adapt," he stated.

The university researchers also are testing a variety of grasses and plants in an effort to reduce maintenance.

"If our studies show that slow-growing species such as bahiagrass (now used primarily in Southeastern N. C.) adapt well to a variety of the state's climates, mowing time could be cut drastically, with millions of dollars in labor and energy saved annually," DiPaola said.

According to DiPaola, retardation of plant growth regulators is and will continue to be a valuable way to reduce grass maintenance.

"Since 1978, the use of regulatory chemicals has saved the state millions of dollars," he stated.

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