

# 'Wildflower Showcase' to open

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Nine Times tract preserved for future generations

■ First of a two-part series.

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**SUNSET** — Upstate residents are going to have to wait six months or so to see the splendor of the Nine Times tract here in northern Pickens County, but it will be worth it.

Calling it the "wildflower showcase of South Carolina," Kristen Austin, the Southern Blue Ridge project director for the Nature Conservancy, said the land just south of State 11 between Holly Springs and Sunset is too valuable to let fall into the hands of developers.

The Nature Conservancy had an agreement with Crescent Resources to get a first chance to buy the land whenever the former land division of Duke Energy decided to sell.

"We looked at it for four years," Austin said. "Before that, for more than a decade, the conservation community had been eyeing it."

In December of 2007, Crescent told The Nature Conservancy the land was going on the market.

"We had to act quickly," Austin said, and as a Christmas present of sorts, The Nature Conservancy received the option to buy it that month.

Upstate Forever bought 560 acres, and the contract also gave Upstate Forever a two-year option to buy the rest of the 2,280-acre property for \$4,800 per acre. In September, The Nature Conservancy bought the land from Upstate Forever and it will preserve the land as a wildlife and heritage preserve.

Monday, long-time Pickens resident Dennis Chastain and Austin took a reporter over hill and dale to show off the highlights of the land. Dotted with five mountains, and divided by the Little Eastatoe River and Nine Times Creek, the land is a haven for black bear, whitetail deer and wild turkey. People have hunted the land as a wildlife management area for years.

But more than that, the land is dotted with such botanical diversity that Chastain said he is simply amazed. Standing along the former railroad bed of the Appalachian Lumber Co. Railroad, Chastain said you could bring a guide to South Carolina wildflowers and in the springtime find 80 percent of the book's contents along a 200-yard section of trail.

And yet, it's less a bounty due to nature than an accident of man.

"Virtually all of the species here," Chastain said, "are due to something man did over the years."

From the Cherokees setting the woods on fire, to lumber cutting, the disturbed land along with the different soils, the Appalachian coves, and the abrupt altitude changes all led to an amazing diversity of plants.

"They did a survey that



MIKE FOLEY / Staff

A 5-acre granite outcropping on the Nine Times tract in northern Pickens County is one of the unique aspects of the 560-acre property.

**Location of 560-acre Nine Times tract bought by Nature Conservancy**  
Upstate Forever has option to buy 1,700 acres across the street.



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

says there are seven distinct plant communities," Chastain said, "but I'd say 'at least.'"

The land is home to an abundance of fish and wildlife, including reptiles, amphibians and even coyotes. A botanical survey found 134 native wildflower species and a "high concentration" of the peregrine falcon that was only recently removed from the federal Endangered Species List.

"And it's only nine miles from Pickens and maybe 40 minutes from Greenville," Chastain said.

The botanical diversity, Chastain said, includes plants normally found as far north as the Smoky Mountains on down to South Carolina's coastal plain.

Not only that, the mountain vistas are breathtaking. Standing on the largest of the nearly dozen granite outcroppings dotting, Chastain said that point is the literal end of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"There are no other mountains south of here," he said.

The botanical diversity is such that 30-foot, fruiting American chestnut trees, a species all but wiped out by blight by 1940, was found on Big Rock Mountain.

"The people of the Upstate have not discovered Nine Times yet," Chastain said. "But when they do, they'll want to give Upstate Forever and The Nature Conservancy a big old bear hug."



MIKE FOLEY / Staff

This yucca plant, commonly found in coastal areas of South Carolina, is growing atop a 5-acre granite outcropping on the Nine Times tract.



MIKE FOLEY / Staff

This monk's hood flower is extremely rare. According to Dennis Chastain, the Nine Times location is the only known population in South Carolina.



MIKE FOLEY / Staff

Nine Times Creek courses through a portion of the tract, which gets its name from the fact this creek crosses the main road through the property nine times.