

Let's Keep Our Backroads Beautiful

EUELL C. RICHARDSON



THE TERM "backroad" has taken on a new concept with the coming of our interstate highway system. This has now come to mean the place where the people are, the backroad-homesite complex. These are the roads more and more motorists are choosing, where the travel is slower paced, and a passerby may note the things which give an area its own particular individuality.

In many instances, however, the backroads expose the wayfarer to mile after mile of rilled and eroded sections of the landscape. These are tiring to a traveler and will soon come to be shunned by man as they are by the wildlife. Even the lowly earthworm avoids such areas and seeks out a more desirable place to live.

Nor is the unsightliness of an unprotected roadside area its only liability: The sediment output from it is often destructive, costly, and even dangerous.

In August of 1962, my family and I traveled from Georgia to a meeting at Cornell University in upstate New York. From there we journeyed on north to Ottawa, Canada, then turned westward through Canada to Detroit, Mich., and then south through the Midwest.

In general, we followed the backroads, seeking out historical sites, scenic drives, and other places of interest along the route. This backroad-homesite complex interested us for we were learning something of the areas' past; the older houses looked different from those of our section of the United States.

The new homes, the outmoded man-

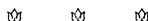
sions, the trees, flowering plants, and shrubs all showed us something of present and past practices and conditions.

As we motored along, we noted the erosion from backslopes of roadside areas. It was plain to see how much the erosion increased as the steepness of the road-bank increased. Ice crystals, called spew-frost, no doubt had sparkled beautifully in the early sun on a clear and frosty morning that followed a rain, but they had also lifted sheets of soil. Rocks had been pried from stony faces. Stones filled the road ditches in many places—some probably rolled onto the paved road surface, creating hazardous conditions.

Certain soil types had eroded much more than others had.

When the winter ended and the heavy rains of spring arrived, most of this loosened material was washed out of the ditches to culverts, stream channels, and reservoirs, causing great damage. Many prized family fishponds were muddied and partially filled with sediment. Where rocks and sediment remained in ditches, highway workers had to remove them.

These ugly—and wasteful—areas can and are being successfully treated and beautified. Grading banks to a slope low enough to accommodate the preparation of soil, planting, and cultural treatment



Euell C. Richardson is an *Agronomist* with the Agricultural Research Service, stationed at the Southeastern Tidewater Experiment Station, in Fleming, Ga.



Helicopter seeds grass on banks of road to Lacrosse, Wash.

is helpful for growth of vegetation. The creation of low slopes is not possible in all the cases. But where feasible, gentle slopes—which are accessible to machinery—can be more economically treated and maintained. Fertilizer and lime can be spread mechanically and incorporated into the root zone of the soil. Seeding, planting, mowing, and other maintenance can be done by machinery.

Though a good vegetative cover is the ultimate solution for the erosion and the beautification problem on roadside areas, the basic concept of what constitutes a good and desirable cover varies with the individual's viewpoint. To the agronomist and highway engineer, acceptable cover is a good protective growth of grasses, legumes, vines, or a mixture of species, adapted to the local climate, site, and exposure, that can be economically established and maintained.

The horticulturist and the garden club member would most probably desire more ornamentals and flowering species. Biologists and hunters would favor the shrubs and seed-bearing plants which provide nesting sites, shelter, and food for birds and other wildlife. The homeowner by a railroad track would most likely prefer

a screen planting which would cut the view and muffle the noise of the passing freight trains.

These viewpoints are logical and good, and plantings of all these types can be observed and enjoyed. Basically for roadside stabilization, the initial cover should be of the sod type with the others fitted into the desired pattern.

An outstanding example of plantings that stabilize and beautify is found on the scenic drive leading from Prescott to the capital at Ottawa, Canada, which will forever be a living and refreshing memory to me.

Here, the old canal of other years and a simple but modern highway paralleled each other. A well-maintained sod of green grass blanketed the landscape, with maples casting their shadows in the cool sun. Massive petunia beds, in full bloom, beautified the incline above the road the length of the drive.

In November 1965, I was on a trip in southeastern Georgia. At the outskirts of Statesboro, Ga., I observed a median area at the junction of two roads. Daylilies (*Hemerocallis*) had been planted in the median strip the year before, and appeared to be doing well.

While I was making photographs of these plantings, three city employees drove up in a truck. Two laborers got out of the truck and began to pick up beer cans and bits of scrap paper and other rubbish from the planting. When I finished photographing, I engaged the foreman in conversation. He gave the following account.

"The ladies of Statesboro dug up lily beds in their yards or home gardens and pooled the plants for the project. Choice varieties were included. A nearby dairyman gave needed manure to fertilize the area. He also supplied trucks and labor to haul and spread the manure. Highway people applied fertilizer and lime. They sent labor and equipment for soil preparation. City officials of Statesboro furnished supervision and labor for planting, mulching, and maintenance."

This was a community effort. Through full cooperation the people of Statesboro created a thing of beauty and a place to enjoy and remember.

This median type planting can and is being extended to include the roadside areas. Individuals and groups provide much of the beauty adjacent to these backroads. Well-developed lawns, properly fertilized, watered, and mowed, are attractive.

Trees, flowering shrubs, vines, and beds of flowering plantings all enhance the beauty of the area.

There are other great opportunities for group action and group enjoyment. For example, church groups could sponsor projects for improving areas adjacent to churches and cemeteries. Scouts, schools, Future Farmers of America, 4-H, garden clubs, civic clubs, and other groups could lend a helping hand to beautify sections.

Agency Assistance

Highway people could, and generally do, assist in developing suitable slopes where feasible. Agricultural agencies like the Extension Service, State agricultural experiment stations, the Soil Conservation Service, and Agricultural Research Service all supply information on species, fertilizers, and cultural treatments. The Agricultural Conservation Program can assist the landowner with beautification work off the right-of-way by cost sharing.

The total effort will lift the spirit of all who participate. Through planning and working with our hands, and giving of ourselves, we come to appreciate the thing that is created. Thus we do more than create an attractive landscape or create a thing of beauty—we develop the habit of searching for the beautiful.

In early September of 1964, my family and I spent a vacation in the Appalachian Mountains. On a Sunday, we drove up the parkway enjoying the scenery and stopping occasionally to photograph interesting scenes.

In late afternoon, we took an exit road from the summit. The exit road was paved. However, grading was such that it did not destroy the surrounding vegetation. Native shrubs, which bloomed in season, bordered the road. Overhead, limbs hung in lattices.

The drive was little more than a tunnel through a refreshingly cool forest.

A small mountain stream with an occasional waterfall paralleled the drive, which was approximately 7 miles in length.

Some eight to twelve hundred migrant urbanites were in the area. Some came just for the day, while others with tents came for the weekend or longer. Small children played in the family camping areas. Larger children played in the stream. Some panned for gold. Adults read, slept, and relaxed.

Retreat roads are a basic part of the backroad system. They are used mainly for getting away from the heat, stress, and strain of city living. They make it possible for us to get close to nature, renew our spirits and strength, and enjoy spring flowers and fall colors.

Nothing can be more pleasing to a tired, road-weary vacationer than a roadside park, beside a mountain stream or on a scenic overlook, where a picnic lunch can be enjoyed. Here the picnicker or traveler can rest, take a little needed exercise, or study nature.

Land Usually Rented

Land for roadside park areas is usually rented by the State from an adjacent landowner. In some cases, the generous highway neighbor may provide the land gratis. On occasion the land is purchased by the State or is donated to the State for these rest areas.

Rest areas vary in size, but regardless of size they are all equipped with tables and litter barrels. Some of the larger rest areas have running water, cooking facilities, and restrooms.

Many rest areas are landscaped with flowering shrubs or shrubs with colorful foliage to enhance their beauty.

Our Nation was settled along the backroads.

Then, the roads were little more than muddy trails in winter and dusty paths in summer. Now, the muddy and dusty trails have been replaced by paved roads. The people still live there.

If you want to see America in all its rustic beauty, travel the backroads, but let's keep them clean and beautiful for all of us to enjoy!