Sunshine State's

PMC Impact

March 2001

This semi-annual newsletter is published by the USDA-NRCS Plant Materials Center, 14119 Broad Street, Brooksville, FL 34601-4525, Tel: 352-796-9600, FAX: 352-799-7305. E-mail: clarence.maura@fl.usda.gov

Plants Available for Wet and Wild Places

Preserving and restoring wetlands has become a hot issue in Florida, and the Brooksville PMC is developing several Florida native grasses for use in wetland restoration. Maidencane is one of the principal components of freshwater systems. It grows 1 to 2 feet tall, and aggressively spreads by rhizomes. This characteristic makes it very valuable for stabilizing streambanks and the edges of ponds. It can also be useful for filtering out sediments before they reach water bodies. 'Citrus Germplasm' maidencane was selected by the PMC because it produces a dense cover and has good stand longevity in drier situations. It has performed very well in plantings by Vero Beach field office staff, and on reclaimed minedlands near Bartow. Citrus maidencane material is available for demonstration and field plantings that are an acre or less in size.

Looking for plant materials to use in wildlife food plots? The Brooksville PMC released 'Chapingo' Mexican teosinte because of it's value for wildlife food. Teosinte is a cousin of corn, having much the same growth characteristics, but smaller ears. Turkey and other small game birds favor the small hard seed. Deer and livestock preferentially graze the new growth. In fact small plots need to be protected or they will be grazed out and never have the opportunity to produce seed. The PMC has limited quantities of teosinte seed available for demonstration plantings. Contact us for further information.

Shades of Blue

Two Florida native eastern gamagrasses were recently released for use in buffer strips and xeriscapes. 'Martin' and 'St. Lucie Germplasm' both have an attractive blue-green color and distinctive growth characteristics. Demonstration sites are needed to let people know about these materials. Contact us if you have a potential site.

A Date to Remember

The Brooksville PMC is hosting a tour of the Center on July 26th for NRCS field and area office staff. Water quality is our first priory, and we've developed valuable technology for helping to keep surface and ground waters clean. Plants developed for coastal dune stabilization are proving helpful for solving other natural resource problems. Beyond developing plant materials for erosion control and livestock forage, we are now developing ground covers, cover crops and plants for native restoration and wild life use. Come and learn more on the 26th.

There are No Dumb Questions

For the past several years, the Brooksville PMC has been taking part in the University of Florida Science Fair on the UF campus in Gainesville. The fair has displays and activities for all ages of kids ranging from grade school to college level. Mary Anne, our Biological Technician, enjoys working with kids, so manning our display booth is a high point for her. She never knows what kinds of comments to expect from the kids. Many of the college engineering students want to know how plant materials apply to engineering. Whether young or old, many kids tell her that their yards look terrible. They want to know what kind of grass they can use for a lawn that will grow in sand, and never needs water or fertilizer. In addition to PMC and NRCS literature, Mary Anne also hands out small packets of seed. Last year she handed out hundreds of packets of grass seed. Several kids reported back to her this year that they had used the seed for their school science projects. This year she handed out 500 packets of teosinte seed. The first question many of the kids asked was, "Can you eat it"? She had to explain that it is for wildlife food, not human consumption. Their next comment often was, "My mom can't grow anything, maybe she can grow this." We suspect she can.

Switchgrass Collection Complete

Last fall, the PMC sent out a collection notice for switchgrass. We extend a hearty thank you to all the field office people who collected or tried to collect this native grass for us. The feedback we received was that this plant was hard to identify and even harder to find. Based on our own collection experiences, we would have to agree. Switchgrass seems to be very choosy about where it grows in Florida. It can't be too wet or too dry, too crowded or too shaded; and it seems to prefer the company of specific other plants, namely cabbage palms. Like Goldy Locks of "The Three Bears" fame, everything needs to be just right for it to colonize a site. It does not seem to grow over large areas either, but rather in small dense pockets. A few collections were found in unexpected places though, like the edges of brackish marshes, and one was even found growing on the sand dunes beside the Atlantic.

The Water Management Districts and State Parks gave us permission to collect on their properties, and gave us a great deal of help in locating and collecting this species. The final assembly totaled 104 collections, and was gathered from 42 counties in Florida. The seed is currently being grown out in the PMC greenhouse. Seedlings will be transplanted into a crossing block in the field this spring. Our goal is to develop a cultivar with consistently high seed production.

Followup for Office Bound Employees

Last spring the Federal Women's Program sponsored a tour of the PMC for office bound employees. At the end of the tour we handed out samples of our two blue-green colored gamagrasses, and asked that participants partner with us in evaluating them for adaptability and performance at their locations. A few participants have already returned their evaluation sheets, but we have received inquiries from others on how to proceed. If you have not done so, now would be a good time to evaluate your plants. For further information or additional evaluation sheets, contact us via sharon.pfaff@fl.usda.gov or by calling or writing the PMC. The information supplied by the evaluations can be very valuable to growers who market these plants.

Signs of a Severe Drought

Florida is going into the fourth year of a very serious cycle of drought. Large fires are again raging throughout the state. The grass has been poor and hay is in short supply. One of our Biological Technicians, Ed Black, owns a herd of cows. To keep from getting too depressed, Ed always tries to find the lighter side of things. He told us this year ranchers weren't bothering to brand their cattle. They'd gotten skinny enough that the ranchers were just photocopying them.

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