

Native Plant Seed Collection

An innovative program to make locally adapted seeds of native grasses and wildflowers available to the Forest Service for use in restoration projects in the Francis Marion/ Sumter Ranger Districts

For the past several years, the SC Native Plant Society (SCNPS) and the US Forest Service (USFS) in South Carolina have collaborated to create a program unique in the US National Forest System: The joining hands of a non-profit environmental group and a Federal agency to replace exotic plants with native species, in restoration and soil erosion prevention programs in the Forests.

How did this program get started?

A conversation between an SCNPS leader and a USFS soil scientist, while bumping down a Forest Service road edged with bahiagrass and *Serecia lespedeza* (two invasive non-native species), evolved into a funding arrangement to fund field trips and volunteers.

Define “invasive non-native species.”

“Native species” are those believed to live in this area before the arrival of Europeans to North America.

“Exotic,” “alien,” or “non-native species” are those with origins outside this area.

“Invasives” tend to grow out of control — displacing the native plants which provide food and shelter for an assortment of native wildlife. Kudzu is a well-known example.

How does this program work?

The Forest Service has provided the funding, and SCNPS has provided the expertise and volunteers to run an annual series of volunteer seed collection field trips.

Along the way, hundreds of volunteers have learned to recognize native grass species, and how best to collect seeds. Hundreds of pounds of seed of native grasses and a few native wildflowers have been collected and turned over to the Forest Service.

Once the seeds are collected, then what?

At first, USFS used the seeds to generate seedling plugs to use in establishing small seed production fields. Forest Service personnel at the Seed Orchard in the Witherbee Ranger district in the Francis Marion NF worked out a very effective protocol for generating large numbers of seedling plugs. Volunteers from SCNPS have assisted in transplanting seedling plugs into small fields with the Forest districts.

The seed fields have been in production for 1 to 4 years, and have proven to be very productive. As seed collection and seed production from planted fields have increased the seed supply, more of the seeds have been used to direct-seed disturbed soil areas in the Forests.

A very important recent development:

As a result of our identifying prolific natural seed production sites in the Forest districts, two identified germplasm collections have been developed and released by the USDA Plant Materials Center at Americus. One is “Newberry” Indiangrass, collected from a site in Newberry County. The other is “Union” purpletop, from a site in Union County.

Seed of these two collections will be made available to farmers in South Carolina, for the purpose of producing large quantities of locally adapted native grass seeds for use by public and private landscape managers. This will lead to economically viable native seed production enterprises in South Carolina.

In summary:

This innovative program by a Federal agency and a non-profit environmental group stands as a model approach to solving a difficult problem. Forest Service leaders in several other states have contacted USFS in South Carolina for guidance in starting similar programs in their states.

The South Carolina Native Plant Society can be justly proud of our part in bringing this about.

For more information, contact Bill Stringer, Clemson University and SC Native Plant Society, 864 979 8034, and visit www.scnps.org.

