

SAVING NATIVE GRASSES

State project helping to re-seed areas that have been disturbed

By Mike Foley

STAFF WRITER
mfoley@greenvillenews.com

One of the sad results of a construction project is a denuded landscape. Stripped of vegetation, it's not only ugly, it's prone to erosion.

To quickly repair the earth, the areas are usually seeded with fescue or other fast-growing grasses that, while effective in preventing erosion, also crowd out native grasses.

Bill Stringer, a Clemson University agronomist, said the state Department of Transportation, Soil Conservation Service and a lot of other agencies and contractors have been responsible for flooding the state with non-native grasses for decades.

"It establishes quickly and spreads, so it is great for erosion control," Stringer said about the non-native species. "It was put there for a good purpose, but it was put there before we knew what we were doing. It was put there before we knew the impact those plants would have on the native population."

Across the state, such replantings, and the almost-universal acceptance of turfgrass by homeowners and commercial growers, has severely limited the Palmetto State's native grasses from flourishing. But for the past six years, members of the South Carolina Native Plant Society and the U.S. Forest Service have been working toward re-establishing native grasses.

By harvesting native grass seed each fall, the two groups — the Forest Service provides funding, the



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Native Plant Society provides much-needed manpower — have succeeded in growing native-grass seedlings that are later used on disturbed areas of the national forests across South Carolina.

"We harvest the seeds, and they plant them and produce seedlings," Stringer explained. Those seedlings are then transplanted to areas where they will thrive. "It's working."

This year, the program is expanding and even more volunteers are needed, Stringer said. Hundreds of volunteers are taught to recognize native grasses and wildflowers and collect them in buckets. Janie Marlowe, a Greenville resident, said it turns out to be an educational and worthwhile day.

She's gone on two such seed-collecting excursions in the past and plans to join more trips this fall.

"It's like an all-day field trip outside, with people who can explain things," she said.

Marlowe is a member of the S.C. Native Plant Society, so she has a built-in interest in the project. But on every trip she gains new insight into her surroundings.

"You know when you're

WANT TO GO?

Here is the schedule for upcoming seed collection trips. For more details, visit: www.scnps.org and then sign up as directed.

■ Saturday, Oct. 30 — Country roads in Pickens and Oconee counties.

■ Sunday, Oct. 31 — Travel into the Andrew Pickens district in Oconee County and collect on USFS grassland areas and along USFS roads.

■ Saturday, Nov. 6 — Along roads in Greenwood, Edgefield and Saluda counties.

■ Sunday, Nov. 7 — The Long Cane district in Abbeville, McCormick and Edgefield counties to collect in grassland areas and along USFS roads.

■ Saturday, Nov. 13 — Blackjacks Heritage Preserve and country roadsides in York, Chester and Union counties.

■ Sunday, Nov. 14 — Along USFS roads and in previously established seed production areas in the Enoree district.

driving down the roadside and you see stuff?" she said. "When you're out there, people point out certain things and then it has a name and then you start to look for it. Eventually, you start seeing things in nature you never looked at before."

Too many of us, Marlowe said, think of nature as just the plants in our own yards.

"For some people, if it's not turf or crape myrtles, then they're weeds," she said.

An offshoot of the seed collection program is the



Photo by Bill Stringer

Set to grow: Above, South Carolina Native Plant Society and student volunteers plant native grass plugs. Above left, John Gough, of the U.S. Forest Service and Bill Stringer, a Clemson University agronomist, with some of the native plant seeds collected last year. At right, volunteers learn more about native grasses before heading out to the fields.



Photo by Karen Burnett

development of two native grasses that may eventually be produced on a large scale and could find their way into your back-yard landscape.

"Newberry" Indiangrass, collected from a site in Newberry County, and "Union" purpletop, from a site in Union County, may soon be available for farmers who want to produce large quantities of seed. In turn, the farmers can sell to the public or to commercial landscapers.

Mike Stoner, owner of Stoner Landscaping in Taylors, said there has been an increasing trend among landscapers to use native plants whenever possible.

"The reason behind it is, the indigenous plants should be able to withstand climate changes better," he said.

"They can withstand droughts better and they're adapted for here."

Stoner uses 50 percent or more native plants in his landscape projects, and said he would use more.

"But it's a little bit of a tough sell to people who are used to well-manicured lawns," he said. "I try to sneak them in where they work, where their strengths make them viable."

Few if any native grasses can withstand constant mowing, Stringer said, and that's why you'll never see the seeds planted along the major interstates. But in areas beyond the typical 30-foot strip of maintained turf, native grasses can be ideal.

"They need less maintenance. They don't need a lot of fertilizer," he said. "And

they're real long-lived."

A side benefit of the grasses, Stringer said, and part of the reason for collecting the seed and propagating the plants for widespread use, is for historical value. The grasses have been in South Carolina for eons, he said.

"When the first explorers came through, they saw vast expanses of savannas with occasional clumps of trees," he said. "That old story about a squirrel being able to hop from tree to tree from the coast to the Mississippi River and never once touching the ground, that's just not true."

"The native grasses have a terrific history to tell. They've been growing here for tens of thousands of years."