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Plant Materials Program

Golden Meadow PMC News Feature

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How We're Helping To Protect Those Coastal Sand Dunes

The robust top growth on this Timbalier Germplasm gulf bluestem does a great job of trapping sand, and its massive root system holds the plant in place—so that all helps to build and stabilize sand dunes," affirms Richard Neill (center), Manager of NRCS's Plant Materials Center in Galliano, La., as he examines three pots of the plant with NRCS soil conservationist Garret Thomassie (right) and office automation assistant Alexis Luke.—PHOTO BY SHAUN HARRIS

Included among the attractions of a trip to the beach are the sun, the surf, the water, the warmth, the breeze, the sand--and the dunes. Specialists with the Natural Resources Conservation Service are doing their part to make sure that we all can keep enjoying the dunes, far into the future, as part of our treks to the beach.

Specifically, employees at NRCS's Plant Materials Center in Galliano, La., recently released a new plant designed for sand dune enhancement and stabilization on coastal beaches and barrier islands--especially the beaches of Louisiana and Mississippi and the barrier islands of the Gulf of Mexico. "It's called Timbalier Germplasm gulf bluestem, and it's the latest plant release in our fight against coastal erosion," explained Don Gohmert, NRCS's Louisiana State Conservationist based in Alexandria, La.

He noted that, after years of evaluating a number of native plants, specialists at the NRCS Center in Galliano concluded that Timbalier Germplasm gulf bluestem has demonstrated that it is a superior plant for holding sand in place and helping to enhance and protect sand dunes by trapping blowing sand.

Michael Trusclair is an NRCS district conservationist based in Thibodaux, La., about 30 miles from the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. He said that the barrier islands, which are located in the Gulf of Mexico just offshore from the mainland of Louisiana and Mississippi, are left over from shifts of the Mississippi River Delta centuries ago. "The islands," he explained, "act as buffers against storm surges from hurricanes and tropical storms by absorbing some of the storm's energy."

He added that the barrier islands are also important as resting and refueling habitat for migratory birds, and can serve as vital nesting areas for many other birds such as the brown pelican.

"So the stability of healthy barrier islands," Trusclair affirmed, "is vital to many coastal communities. And Timbalier is now playing an important role in the long-term

health and stabilization of barrier islands by trapping sand and building dunes."

"Timbalier's robust top growth is now trapping sand, and its massive root system is now holding it in place--thereby building dunes over time," said Center Manager Richard Neill. "As the dunes build, they enable the islands to sustain themselves as they buffer the Gulf's storms. The plant is also being used on shorelines and beaches along the Gulf coast."

Neill clarified that he and his staff don't develop plant species, but rather evaluate plants that they have found in nature. "We try to determine what are the best plant choices--from the plants we've gathered from around the region--which would be the most useful in different situations and locales," he pointed out.

And, he added, the release of this latest plant means that private nurseries and plant growers can obtain its vegetative rootstock from the Center and grow the plant for coastal restoration projects.

Neill noted that Timbalier is the third such plant evaluated and released by the Center specifically to deal with dunes protection. The other plants include Caminada seaoats and Fourchon bitter panicum.

Gohmert pointed out that NRCS has 27 Plant Materials Centers located in a total of 25 states. "They are all designed to evaluate and transfer effective state-of-the-art plant science technology to meet the needs of our customers," he underscored.

And, concerning the focus on Timbalier by specialists at the Plant Materials Center in Galliano, it's yet another part of the overall effort by USDA to help rebuild the Gulf coast.

--Herb Bourque

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