

Mid-South Plant News

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Coffeerville, MS

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I awoke today and found
frost perched on the town,
It harbored in a frozen sky
and gobbled summer down.

When the sun turns traitor
cold and all the trees are
shivering in a naked row,

I get the urge for going but I
never seem to go.

I get the urge for going
when the meadow grass is
turning brown,
Summertime is falling down
And winter's closing in.

---Urge for Going
by Joni Mitchell

Bob visits Mississippi

Last October, Bob Escherman (left), National Program Leader for Plant Materials, paid his first visit to the MSPMC.

It was an opportune time to meet the new manager, Paul Rodrigue (right), and the new agronomist, Tommy Moss, who replaced Joel Douglas and Janet Grabowski, respectively, earlier this year.

Bob toured the facilities and our active study plots that are currently being maintained on 320 acres of



USDA Forest Service land that has been used for conservation studies for more than forty years.

Bob addressed the center's staff and discussed program management from a national perspective, while explaining the importance of the Performance Index to meet fiscal year requirements.

FFA Soil Judging Contest

In late November, the MSPMC, co-hosted the Mississippi State Land Judging Contest. About eighty students representing 20 FFA teams located throughout the state participated in this annual event and were tested on their knowledge of soil types, topography, and proper land use practices. Four different sights were established on the center's acreage to provide enough soil diversity for students to compare properties such as texture, depth, stoniness, and permeability. These characteristics determine the "land capability units" for crop production and resource conservation.

The winning teams were awarded and first-place students from Kossuth, MS will have a chance to compete at the 55th National Land & Range Judging Contest scheduled for next spring in Oklahoma.

The Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts Auxiliary members funded the event, while technical expertise and assistance were provided by NRCS personnel and the Yalobusha County SWCD.



It has been an eventful year for the plant materials staff. The annual Wildflower Tour was held in late June and we sponsored a couple of Field Days in early November.

Historically, the Wildflower Tour has been a collaborative effort between the MS Soil & Water Commission (MSWCC), the PMC, and several different agencies dedicated to promote native wildflowers for erosion control, wildlife enhancement, and beautification for private and public lands. After producing native species for parts of the Natchez Trace Parkway in the 1990's, the PMC continued these efforts and eventually was able to supply the MSWCC with more adaptable plants than the commercial sources that were readily available, but less prolific in the establishment of native plant communities. These seeds are made available to the public by the MS Soil & Water Conservation Districts and, in turn, district funds from these sales are used to educate and enhance public awareness about the use of native wildflowers for restorative purposes.



Paul Rodrigue speaking to visitors on tour wagon

This outreach has proven to be a continuous success and this year's Wildflower Tour attracted over 230 visitors. Surprisingly, about 80% were newcomers. Amongst those first-timers was Sherry Surette, Plant Materials Specialist at the State Office in Jackson. She provided information about Cogon Grass, a non-native, invasive species that is becoming more of a problem in the south than Kudzu. Two indoor presentations on native landscaping, a soil-sampling exhibit, and a plant swamp were amongst the other activities that visitors enjoyed while waiting for the tour wagon to transport them to the field where seven stops highlighted the center's current production and research. Amongst those sites were native grasses, wildflowers, wetland plants, and Agroforestry.

To diversify our audience and increase awareness about our mission, we sponsored a couple of Field Days last month for NRCS staff and private landowners. The Technical Field Day allowed agency employees to observe conservation practices on four different sites that displayed wildlife food plots, alley-cropping, silvopasture, & vegetative barriers. The second tour for landowners focused on these same practices but with less technical information and more emphasis on government-funded programs



Alan Holditch, NRCS State Forester demonstrates Silvopasture

that are endorsed by the Soil & Water Conservation Districts throughout our service area. Local farmers & wildlife enthusiasts were the bulk of these visitors with both tours attracting over 75 folks.

One thing is for certain: as we team up with our partners to promote awareness, it has strengthened our relationship with the public and has improved the success of our mission, "*Helping people help the land*". Without our partners, these events could not be possible.



Jeff Wilson, MSU Ext. Service presented Trees & Shrubs in the Landscape at Wildflower Tour

PMC Partners

MS Soil & Water Conservation Commission

Mississippi State University

MSU Extension Service

MS Soil & Water Conservation Districts

Holly Springs NF

Memphis Zoo

ARS

MSPMC Partners With Mississippi Department of Wildlife & Fisheries

For the past two growing seasons, MSPMC releases have helped the MDWFP improve habitat in wildlife openings located on Wildlife Management Areas across the state. A MOU between the two agencies provides for seed cleanings (seconds) from MSPMC seed production to be utilized by the MDWFP for wildlife plantings. In return the MDWFP can evaluate the performance of the releases under different conditions providing this information back to the MSPMC.

“Quail Haven” reseeded soybeans (*Glycine soja*) were planted in 2005 on four areas across the state. They included Malmaison, O’Keefe, Caney Creek, and Copiah WMAs. Habitat conditions varied by area as well as the purpose for which the seed was planted. Quail habitat improvement was the focus of managers in the hill country areas, while deer and waterfowl were the focus of managers on Delta lands.

“Chiwapa” billion dollar grass (*Echinochloa frumentacea*) was planted in 2006 on four areas across the state as well. They included Malmaison, O’Keefe, Trim Cane, and Grenada Waterfowl WMAs. Waterfowl habitat improvement was the priority of MDWFP on each of the areas; yet conditions were still variable including crop fields, moist soil areas, abandoned fish ponds, and cypress/tupelo brakes.

Each species has reseeded characteristics and will continue to be managed and evaluated in the future.

IRRIGATION SYSTEM

The MSPMC utilized its irrigation system for the first time in 2006. Due to the prolonged growing season water deficit, production fields of ‘Highlander’ eastern gamagrass were irrigated following harvest in order to promote fall tillering.

The irrigation system was installed in 2002 by the staff. The supply line is 4” PVC with risers located at perspective irrigation points. Water comes from a Forest Service floodwater retarding structure located on the MSPMC. The water is delivered by a tractor-powered centrifugal pump. The entire mainline is pressurized.



Water is delivered in the field by either aluminum furrow irrigation pipe (4”) or impact type sprinkler irrigation heads on portable aluminum lateral pipe (4”).

The MSPMC utilizes the system to assist with production of release foundation seed, activate chemicals and establish plants for various studies if rainfall is not timely or adequate.

Native Grass I.D. Block at the Delta Conservation Demonstration Center

A native grass ID block was established at the Delta Conservation Demonstration Center (DCDC) in Washington County during the summer of 2006. The block will be utilized for training employees and landowners in the identification of native warm-season grasses to include: eastern gamagrass, switchgrass, big bluestem, little bluestem, purpletop, and switchcane.

The NRCS sponsors training courses at the DCDC regularly and the DCDC hosts its own field days. During an orientation course for new employees in September 2006, the native grass ID block was used to demonstrate MSPMC’s goals & activities. Vegetative check dams at the DCDC were also utilized to demonstrate the use of plant materials in conservation activities to newcomers.





Silver Beardgrass

vs.

Cogongrass

By Sherry Surette, Ph.D.

Many of you have most likely been out late in the summer and noticed a very conspicuous grass producing massive amounts of silvery-white, silky seedheads along roadside areas across our state. Some of you may have assumed this grass to be the invasive species, cogongrass (*Imperata cylindrica*), which happens to produce massive amounts of silvery-white, silky seedheads during the spring, instead. However, the fall flowering grass acting as the “cogon imposter” has been none other than silver beardgrass (*Bothriochloa laguroides*). This native weed is actually a warm-season, short-lived, perennial bunch grass historically more common to the western U.S. Vehicular traffic and mowing in recent years has most likely contributed to the increased spread of this species. Although silver beardgrass appears to be somewhat weedy, it is currently of little concern as an invasive in our state.

In its western range, silver beardgrass is used as forage for livestock in the early weeks of spring; however, it later becomes relatively unpalatable after seedheads mature. This species is also a prolific seed producer that becomes readily established in areas that are overgrazed or denuded of vegetation. Therefore, prescribed grazing is encouraged in areas where this grass is commonly found.



Cogongrass
(*Imperata cylindrica*)

Silver beardgrass
(*Bothriochloa laguroides*)

Although silver beardgrass represents little threat to native habitats across our state, the invasive species cogongrass continues to pose a dilemma. This species is a non-native, rhizomatous grass that has negatively impacted many areas in central and south Mississippi, and has the potential to do more harm due to the current lack of knowledge that the general public has about this invasive.

In fact, researchers are predicting that cogongrass will likely spread more extensively across the state due to the lack of proper cleaning performed on heavy equipment being used in Hurricane Katrina clean-up efforts. It is critical that individuals be informed about the importance of washing off cogongrass infested machinery involved in clean-up efforts prior to intra- and interstate transports.

The lack of equipment cleaning is not the only practice currently promoting the dispersal of cogongrass. In addition, the ornamental form of cogongrass has been sold at nurseries across the state. This is most likely a case of “mistaken identity” because of the extensive list of trade names used for this species, and the attractive red foliage of the ornamental form. The numerous trade names used for cogongrass in the ornamental plant industry include: Japanese bloodgrass, satintail grass, blady grass, speargrass, and cotton wool grass.

Easy identification characteristics of cogongrass include the presence of: 1) leaves with extremely rough margins and prominent off-center white mid-veins, 2) extremely long, scaly, and sharply-pointed rhizomes, 3) the production of large amounts of fluffy white seed heads during the spring (note: seeds generally have very low viability).

Native Plant Spotlight

Eastern Redcedar
Juniperus virginiana



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Eastern redcedar is an evergreen conifer widely distributed throughout eastern North America. Commonly seen in old pastures and fencerows, this tree is often one of the first to occupy abandoned fields - a pioneer species in the natural process known as succession. Eastern redcedar reaches a height of 40 - 60 feet and has a pyramidal, symmetrical growth habit that becomes more open with age. It will grow on a wide variety of soil types ranging from dry, rocky uplands to moist floodplains.

This tree offers wildlife benefits for a number of bird and animal species. The fleshy, blue cones of female trees are an important winter food source for cedar waxwings, cardinals, bobwhite quail, robins, and gray squirrels. The dense evergreen foliage provides cover for mourning doves, mockingbirds, and cedar waxwings. Cardinals and several other bird species use the fibrous bark as nesting material.

A tough tree with a tenacious character, eastern redcedar has few serious insect and disease problems. This makes it a good choice as an ornamental. This tree is excellent for hedges, specimens, background plantings and windbreaks; its main requirement in the landscape is full sun.

MSPMC Active Releases

- 'Halifax' Maidencane
- 'Chiwapa' Japanese Millet
- 'Highlander' Eastern Gama Grass
- Hopefield Selection Trailing Wildbean
- Idian Bayou Source Powdery Thalia
- Lark Selection Partridge Pea
- Leaf River Source Wool Grass
- Leflore Source Creeping Burhead
- 'Meechee' Arrowleaf Clover
- 'Quail Haven' Reseeding Soybean
- Morton Germplasm Shrub Willow



In heavy soils, eastern redcedar might be considered as a substitute for the commonly planted Leyland cypress (x *Cupressocyparis leylandii*). The plants look similar, however Leyland cypress is susceptible to several fungal diseases when planted in less-than-optimal drainage conditions and offers little wildlife benefit. There are a number of commercially available eastern redcedar cultivars such as 'Canaertii', a prolific fruiter, and 'Emerald Sentinel', a columnar form with dark green foliage.

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