



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](mailto:clarence.maura@fl.usda.gov)

## New Switchgrass Collection

The PMC recently sent out a request for field office assistance in collecting switchgrass seed. You might be wondering why, since the PMC already has 3 releases of this species.

Switchgrass is an important part of our ecosystem in Florida. It provides food and cover for wildlife, produces high quality forage for livestock, is a valuable soil stabilizing plant and makes an excellent windbreak or buffer. In order to make it economical for our customers to plant this native grass, we must develop a plant capable of producing good viable seed consistently. Our current releases 'Miami', 'Stuart' and 'Wabasso' unfortunately do not have this capability and must be propagated vegetatively. Currently, to plant an area with seed, farmers and ranchers must use the cultivar 'Alamo' which was released by the Texas Plant Materials Center. 'Alamo' is the only released variety that has performed reasonably well in our Florida climate.

Some strains of Florida native switchgrasses can out produce 'Alamo' in forage. The Univ. of FL has joined with us in an endeavor to develop a variety with good seed production. If you know of sites containing switchgrass or need assistance identifying it, let the PMC staff know.



## Tours of the Center

In April, the PMC was pleased to welcome the Office Bound Employees tour sponsored by the Federal Women's Program. Many of the employees had never been to our center and were surprised to see the many things that are done here. Each person was given potted plants of some of the species we are working with. Everyone enjoyed the tour and indicated they would like to come back.

The University of FL/IFAS sponsored a tour for forage workers in August. Participants included researchers, county extension agents and other parties interested in Switchgrass forage research in Florida. The Plant Materials Center was one of their many stops. Of special interest to them was the work the PMC has done with eastern gamagrass and switchgrass. Bahiagrass and bermudagrass are two of the primary forages used in Florida. However, these two species do not begin spring regrowth until March or April. In comparison to bahiagrass, Florida strains of gamagrass could potentially be a source of 'stockpiled' higher quality standing forage during the winter months. Switchgrass especially has potential to fill the early spring forage niche in Florida. Switchgrass will produce a substantial amount of high quality forage during the cool early spring months. If it is not slowed by a killing frost, it will even grow during the winter. The key to using native species for forage is management, since the natives are much more sensitive to grazing pressure than introduced species like bahiagrass.

## Constructed Wetlands

The term “constructed wetlands” is being heard more, as awareness of the need to purify water being returned to the aquifer increases. During the Plant Materials Technical Committee teleconference, this topic was discussed at length. Constructed wetlands are increasingly being used for storm water run-off, as well as cleansing effluent wastewater.

Georgia, Alabama and So. Carolina have a number of these systems in place, to treat the wastewater from confined livestock operations, municipalities, as well as the smaller rock reed filter systems for individual residences. In Florida, it is a slow and difficult process to have this type of system approved by the state, and therefore there are not that many in existence.

Constructed wetlands for storm water run-off should be of interest to FL communities. Currently, retention ponds with very little vegetation are used to catch run-off. Appropriate plant materials could potentially remove many nutrients before they passed through the rapidly percolating sands found in much of FL.

## On a Roll

Tony Polizos and two of his coworkers in the Naples FO, Bob Beck and Mike Hussion, helped the Brooksville PMC establish the first of a series of native grass advanced evaluation plantings in July. The location was a flatwoods site recently cleared of Brazilian pepper. Three native grass species: common maidencane (*Panicum hemitomon*), blue maidencane (*Amphicarpum muhlenbergianum*), and eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*) are being tested for adaptation and performance on a variety of sites around Florida. The trials contain several accessions of each species, and will help the PMC to identify superior performers for release to the commercial market.

A second planting was recently placed along the margin of a lake on a reclaimed minedland site provided by Cargill Fertilizer in Polk Co. Sites in Pasco and Citrus County are scheduled for planting this fall.

These evaluation plantings are off to a good start, however planting sites are still needed in north Florida and the panhandle. If you know of such a site, please give the PMC staff a call.

## A Sight to Behold

Driving past the PMC, it is hard to miss the beautiful fluffy purple plumage on the *Muhlenbergia* in the initial evaluation plots in the front field. When you see it in bloom you can certainly see why this native grass is increasingly being used for landscape purposes. Even without the bloom, the dark green, erect leaves are attractive.

We are working with this plant for soil stabilization, however in the Carolina’s it is used for the age-old art of basket weaving.

## View Along FL Roadways

Median strips of Florida highways and city streets could see more changes in the next few years. Like many other states, our road departments are always looking for ways to decrease maintenance cost and improve the aesthetics of major roadways.

Interest is being shown in using low maintenance plant materials, preferably native plants, for these situations. The PMC is working with several native plants that are good candidates for roadside plantings, such as eastern gamagrass (especially the blue-green varieties we recently released), *Spartina* and *Muhlenbergia* species. Although a non-native, perennial peanuts are increasingly being used for persistent low maintenance roadside plantings. Perennial peanut was planted in a median strip on U.S. Hwy. 19 more than 20 years ago and continues to be a solid mass of yellow when in bloom. There are several varieties of peanuts with different shaped leaves, blossoms in different shades of yellow, and lower growing habits that are being tested for use along roadways.

## **Unusual Visitor at the PMC**

Thick wooded areas surround the PMC on three sides, and it isn't unusual to see deer or wild turkey out in our fields. However, you do not expect to be hissed at by a 6ft. alligator as you walk up to the front door. This is exactly what happened to Biological Technician, Mary Anne Gonter in the middle of August. The alligator had barricaded

itself behind the shrubs by the front door. An experienced trapper rescued us from our grumpy guest and relocated it to a pond away from the Center.

Prior to coming to our front door, the alligator had stopped in our constructed wetland in back of the office. We assume this was a cool spot to rest until he continued his travels.