

Mike Owsley¹, David Findley²

¹USDA-NRCS Jimmy Carter Plant Materials Center, Americus, Georgia, ²USDA-NRCS Columbia, South Carolina

The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Jimmy Carter Plant Materials Center (PMC) located in Americus, Georgia is involved in several studies evaluating native warm season grasses for soil conservation, forage, and wildlife habitat improvement.

The Jimmy Carter PMC, in cooperation with the NRCS in South Carolina, and Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner South Carolina, is in the process of increasing a local South Carolina switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) for soil conservation and stabilization.

In February 2008 the Jimmy Carter PMC and Mepkin Abbey took vegetative material of a switchgrass from Beaufort County South Carolina near Penn Center.



Penn Center is a significant historic site in coastal South Carolina. It was established in 1862 to educate Sea Island slaves freed at the beginning of the Civil War. The first principals were Northern missionaries. By 1900 the school was called Penn Normal and provided teacher training, training in wheel-wrighting, carpentry, cobbling, blacksmithing, and the agricultural sciences. When Penn closed in 1948 it became the Penn Community Services center.



In the early 1980s it became the Penn Center. Penn Center's mission is to promote and preserve the history and culture of the Gullah people of the South Carolina Low Country.

Penn Center provides African-American museums, heritage day celebrations, history and culture programs.

During the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference utilized Penn Center as a training site for retreat and strategic planning. The Peace Corps and the Conscientious Objector Programs used the site for training, lodging, planning and community service.

The switchgrass collected near Penn Center grows in a transition zone between the high marsh and maritime forest.

Associated plants growing with the switchgrass are marshhay cordgrass (*Spartina patens*), black needlerush (*Juncus roemerianus*), marsh elder (*Iva frutescens*), sea myrtle (*Baccharis halimifolia*), cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*), live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) and southern red cedar (*Juniperus silicicola*). This area is exposed to seasonal inundation from spring tides.



After the switchgrass has been increased vegetatively at the Jimmy Carter PMC and Mepkin Abbey, plans will be made to release the material as Penn Center germplasm switchgrass.

Penn center germplasm will be a local source identified release adapted to the low country of South Carolina.

Development adjacent to high marsh areas is increasing all along the South Carolina Coast.

Penn Center germplasm will fit a niche as a soil conservation plant along the transition between high marsh and maritime forested areas.