

Farmers grow Florida-native wildflowers for seed harvest

Acres of blooming wildflowers met the eyes of members of the Garden Club of Switzerland on May 15 when they went on a field trip to Alachua. They visited the farm of Terry Zinn to learn about wildflower seed-growing farms in Florida.

"It was really awesome," club president Carolyn Mullinax said. "Everyone who went enjoyed the trip. The flowers were very impressive, and we learned a lot about the process."

Wildflower seed growing is a relatively new crop option for farmers in North Florida. The venture began a few years ago with about eight farmers in the region. Their mission was to grow Florida-native wildflowers for seed harvest. The seed was to be used by the Florida Department of Transportation for roadside projects.

The cooperative will begin harvesting seeds this month and will continue harvesting throughout the summer and fall. The seeds are dried, cleaned, graded and bagged, and held at optimum temperature and humidity until purchased by the FDOT. If any seeds are left over, they are sold to the public.

Native Florida wildflower seed is preferred for use by the FDOT for roadside planting because Florida-grown seed germinates better than seed grown out of state. Wildflower seed production in the state is far less than the demand, though, according to members of the growers association.

That makes it necessary for some seeds to be purchased from states such as Texas.

"This is a relatively new program, but the more diverse we can get, the better," St. Johns Agriculture Services Director David Dinkins said. "Wildflower growing also ties in well with our agri-tourism business."

By planting wildflower seed in specific areas, the state not only adds beauty to roadsides but saves thousands of dollars in mowing fees. In addition, the acres devoted to wildflowers attract bees to specific areas.

During their visit to Zinn's farm, the members learned about wildflower species such as coreopsis, gaillardia, green-eyed daisy, pink powder puff plant, phlox, white indigo, coral bean and many more.

"The trip was wonderful," Claire Fioriti said. "I wish he [Zinn] had an apprentice program. He is so knowledgeable I would sign up right away."

Other growers in the area are J.R. Newbold and Greg Harris of Crescent City. Most growers will host small tours at peak blooming times.

Harvest comes directly after the seeds have set, so growers farther south harvest seeds first and growers up north harvest later. Specialized equipment is used for harvesting, cleaning and grading the seeds.

For more about growers in North Florida, go to the Wildflower Seed Growers Association's site at www.florida-wildflowers.com.

If you would like to talk to me about growing native plants or wildflowers in your own yard, don't hesitate to contact me.