

## Native Seed Production in the Southeastern U.S.

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The majority of seed planted in the southeastern U.S. is that of introduced pasture grasses such as bahiagrass (*Paspalum notatum*), bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*), tall fescue (*Schedonorus phoenix* syn. *Festuca arundinacea*), and the main forbs are various non-native clovers (*Trifolium* spp.). This is because seed of these species is cheap, plentiful, and establishes easily. However, most of these species provide poor habitat for many wildlife species and can become weedy and problematic. USDA Farm Bill Programs such as the Cropland Reserve Program and Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program have placed greater emphasis on the use of native species, as have many state and local restoration efforts. However, the development and production of adapted sources of native seed in the Southeast trails behind that of many other regions of the country and this has severely hampered these restoration efforts. Cultivars of grasses and forbs native to the Southeast that were developed in other parts of the country (e.g., 'Alamo' switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*) can be used with varying success in parts of the Southeast but are poorly suited for use as far south as Florida. Current restoration efforts in Florida rely on seed of variable and often poor quality collected from native stands. Another factor when considering the use of native species is that local seed sources rather than widely adapted cultivars are desired by many restoration professionals. The USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service Plant Materials Centers (PMC) in the Southeast have been working for several decades to evaluate, select, and release sources of local native grasses and forbs for use in the region and to develop techniques to facilitate commercial seed production systems that ensure high quality seed can be produced. However, the extended growing season and ample rainfall in the Southeast leads to issues, especially rampant weed growth, that severely impact plant development research at the PMC and seed production once selections are released for commercial production. Most of these southern species and ecotypes are so specific in their environmental tolerances that they cannot be produced in other parts of the country, where weeds and other stresses are not as prevalent. Therefore, the cost of restoration projects is likely to remain high and the success of many of these plantings will remain quite variable until the local seed production industry develops to the point where PMC selections and other sources of local species that are desired for restoration use can be produced in larger quantities and at reasonable prices.