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Center tries to find natural defense to Louisiana's coastal erosion

By [MIKE DUNNE](#)

Advocate staff writer

GALLIANO -- Scientists are working to find the best plants to help hold together Louisiana's coastal marshes.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Plant Materials Center here is one of 26 research centers across the nation dedicated to developing heartier, more productive, plants. It is the only one that focuses on wetlands plants.

The center, which began informally with 10 ponds on a few acres, has grown to 90 acres and 20 impoundments. "We have the ability to grow anything" in terms of wetlands plants, said center director Gary Fine.

"Everything we get comes from the wild," Fine said of the plants being grown and tested by the center. "We collect only a small amount because we don't want to disturb an area," he said.

Most wetlands plants will reproduce through their root systems. Many others can be reproduced by cuttings which will root and grow. Most produce some seed but not viable seed that can repopulate areas, he said.

The center is not looking for that one "super plant" but for plants in a specific genetic range that can do well in various conditions but still have some different genetic coding.

The center has cultivated three different grass species and one tree and released them to commercial growers. Those plants are often included in the specifications for bids on some coastal restoration projects.

The species are: vermilion smooth cordgrass, Brazoria seashore paspalum, Fourchon bitter panicum and pelican black mangrove.

"We know the origin of the plant, we know under what conditions they will grow, we know how to handle them," Fine said of the releases.



Advocate staff photo by Bill Feig
Gary Fine, director of the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Plant Materials Center in Galliano, checks on some of the hundreds of marsh plants being cultivated in the research center's three greenhouses.

The name typically points to where the plants originated, such as Fourchon, which is not far from this center, or the Vermilion Bay area.

"We don't sell any plants from here," he said, although the agency will provide stock for commercial growers to "get them started."

Don Gohmert, state conservationist for the Natural Resource Conservation Service, said there are between eight and 15 commercial growers using stock from the center and who can respond to bids that specify release-certified plants.

The center is also working on reproducing a sea oat variety, one of the few found west of the Mississippi River.

Fine won't reveal where he found the original stock except to say it comes from an area hit by Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

"The area looked like a war zone, but this plant was still standing. It must have had a deep root system. We are looking at it for dune stabilization."

The sea oat variety is one of those plants that produces seed that is typically not viable, so it is being reproduced from the root system, he said.

Fine opened one potted plant and demonstrated how workers separate the stems and root systems and replant them in new pots so they can expand.

"We can produce thousands of them easily this way," he said.

Those grown by seed present another problem. "The babies might be weak plants, or they might be better plants. That is what we have to determine. We hope the first generation is better than the parents," he said.

The center also maintains what it calls "foundation" stock. It has more than 200 collections of native smooth cordgrass sitting in clumps in one pond.

Other things the Plant Materials Center is now doing is working on finding the best woody plant -- oaks and smaller trees such as hackberry and mulberry -- that can be used to repopulate ridges and barrier islands.

Neotropical songbirds, which migrate from North America to South America over the Gulf of Mexico, use the trees to prepare for the long flight down. In spring, as they arrive, they need a place to rest and refuel and those trees are important, Fine said.

Fine said the center has collected more than 50 different types of oak trees from Texas to Florida to Georgia's barrier islands. "We have a broad, diverse range" of coastal oaks to evaluate, Fine said.

The agency has also recently been experimenting with aerial seeding of

smooth cordgrass, the dominant plant species in coastal salt marshes. During the summer of 2000, scientists and natural resources agency personnel began to notice that more than 100,000 acres of salt marsh had turned brown and in some cases completely died.

Congress appropriated \$3 million to study the problem, and the Plant Materials Center is a key part of the restoration effort.

Biologists also collected "survivor" plants from the dead areas and propagated them over the past year and began replanting them this fall in an effort to identify those that might have better genetic abilities to recolonize the dead areas, Fine said.

Gohmert, the state conservationist, said the Plant Materials Center has really helped make coastal restoration efforts more successful. Before the center was created "we were just toying with the plants" in a hit-and-miss manner.

"We are looking for plants that distinguish themselves and survive," Gohmert said.

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