



Workers hand collect forb seeds at the Mason State Tree Nursery

@ORC

Issue # 94
October 2, 2018

A Hidden Tre(e)asure

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The History of the Mason State Tree Nursery and how it has evolved into the major operation it is today is as enriched as the plant life it grows. The Mason State Tree Nursery is the largest producer of native Illinois wildflower seed east of the Mississippi, with a high product quality they can guarantee. The nursery has thrived since its inception in the 1930s, encountering many challenges along the way.

The Mason Nursery was established in the 1930's to supply tree seedlings to what was to become Sand Ridge State Forest. Sand Ridge State Forest started out of tax-reverted, homestead ground. Homesteaders who originally cleared the ground to grow crops found that the sandy soils were not capable of producing enough crops to survive on. They then abandoned the homestead property which reverted to the State sometime in the 20's and 30's. With the Great Depression came the formation of the Civilian

Conservation Corps (CCC) with camps established in Forest City and Manito. Seedlings from the Mason State Nursery were planted on what is now Sand Ridge State Forest by workers from the CCC camps. Any of the pine plantations on Sand Ridge State Forest today date back to the planting efforts of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's. Throughout the decades the nursery has expanded beyond growing just trees to include native shrubs, native grasses and wildflowers and wetland plant seed mixes.

Fall is the busiest time at the Mason State Tree Nursery. During this time, they begin harvesting native seeds by hand, sorting and drying each crop. It's also a time to fumigate the ground before planting new nuts and seeds for next year's crop. This fall, about 15 acres of land will be fumigated, a process where chemical gas is injected into the ground to kill off weed seed,



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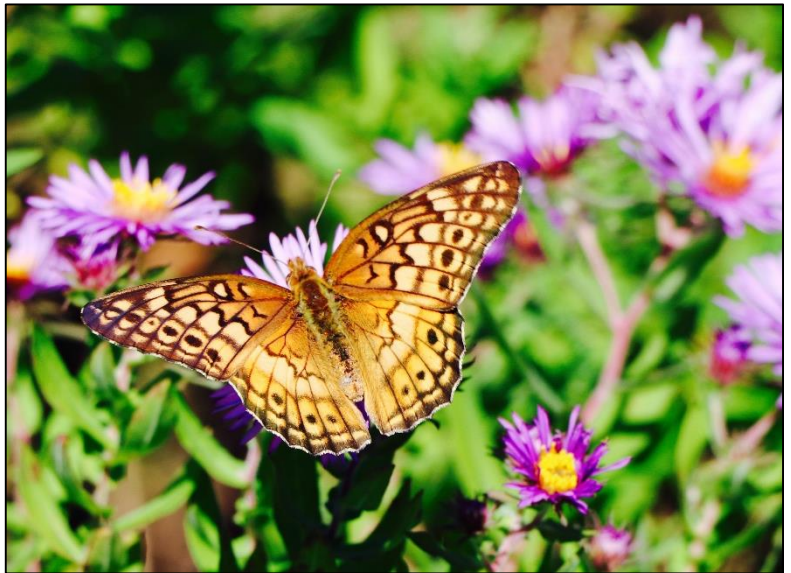
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Native seeds are stored in one of the seven cold storage units on Mason State Nursery Property

“Everything we produce here is native Illinois ecotype,”

~ Dave Horvath, Mason State Tree Nursery Manager, a.k.a. Jack-of-all-trades for the last 25 years.



A Great Spangled Fritillary enjoys the nectar from asters at the nursery



Plum seed drying out before it is processed and cleaned at the nursery

bugs, critters and anything else that would interfere with the success of producing the purest products as possible. After fumigation, they leave the plastic sheeting on the treated ground for about a week or two and then let it aerate for another week before planting tree nuts and forb seeds. As the temperatures drop in November, the nursery will harvest their tree seedlings to place in one of several cold storage facilities through the winter.

After a much-needed break in December, staff at the nursery will begin sorting and grading the tree seedlings in January based on size and height and take inventory of each variety before taking orders in February. The nursery will take orders and ship throughout the Spring. During the Summer, staff are busy growing the plants and trees in the fields and in pots, irrigating and fertilizing, while constantly performing maintenance in most of areas of the aged nursery.

The Mason State Tree Nursery produces about 1 million trees and shrubs each year, along with about 1000 lbs. of native short grass species and 3000 lbs. of native wild flower seed. The Illinois Department of Transportation is the largest single purchaser of the nursery’s seed and plant stock, buying about half of what the nursery produces annually for their roadside pollinator initiative, “Operation Habitat”, with private land owners being their second largest consumer of nursery stock. The nursery has recently partnered with the Pollinator Partnership, a world-wide non-profit group dedicated solely to promote the health of pollinators. Pollinator Partnership volunteers across

the nation send milkweed and other native forb seeds for the nursery to process and clean before sending it to Pollinator Partnership's headquarters. This year Mason State did \$25,000 of in-kind labor for the Partnership.



Rows of healthy red oak seedlings grow between the nursery's much needed irrigation system

All the native flower seed at Mason State is handpicked. "So, we can pretty much guarantee that there is no weed seed in our product," said Horvath. Though handpicking their product ensures better quality, it also poses a major challenge for the nursery and extra help is hired for collecting the prized seed. One of the many challenges that Mason State faces is man-power. Going from a staff of around 40 people years ago to now only 5 full time employees, poses many issues. The nursery is constantly looking for seed collectors across the state to help gather Illinois native seeds for their inventory.



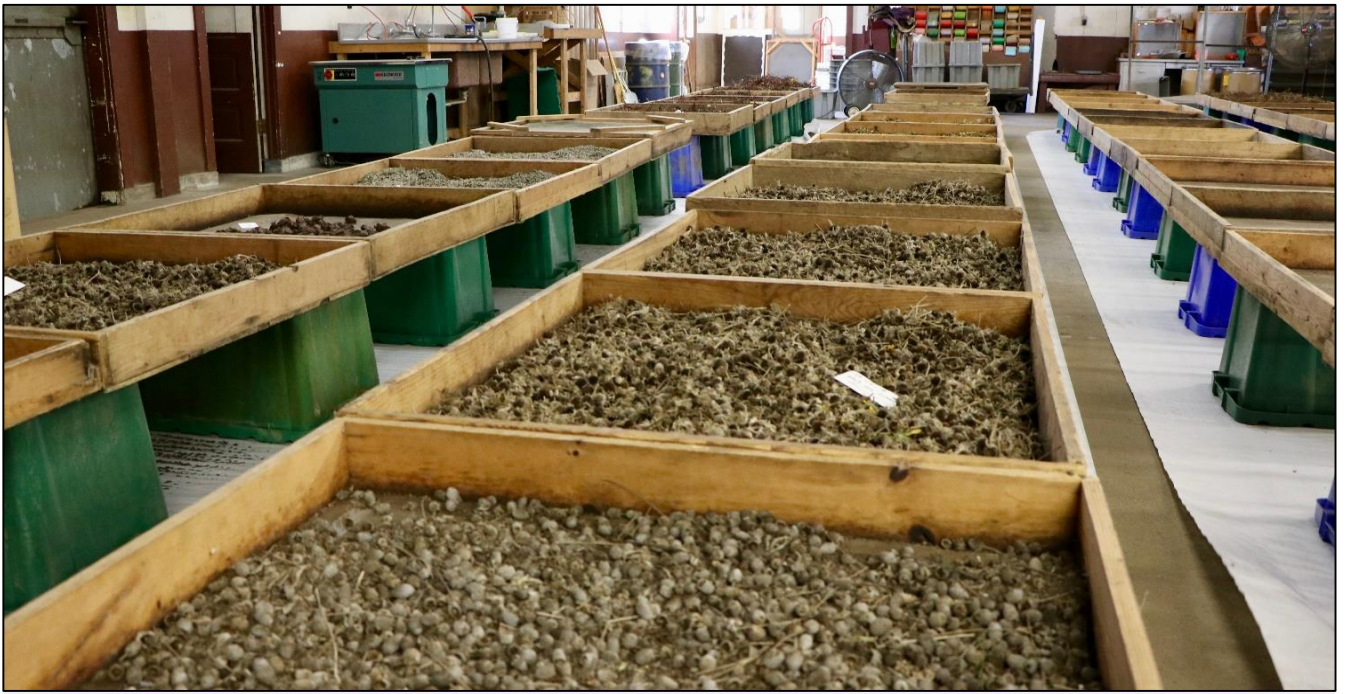
Cleaned and processed seed ready to go into their mixes

Most of the original seeds collected for Mason State Tree Nursery was done by IDNR staff at relatively undisturbed places like old graveyards and rail road tracks. So, setting priorities and timing is everything when running this large of a nursery.



Prairie Blazing Star in bloom at the Nursery

Another major challenge the Mason State Tree Nursery faces is getting their product marketed, sold and out the door. The Nursery sits in the middle of nowhere in Mason County and its very costly to ship trees and potted plants and shrubs to individuals. In the past, Mason State supplied the product and seedlings for the Forest Development Act. This program allowed private land owners to develop forestry management plans for their land through the division of Forestry and Mason State would provide the trees for those plans for free. Now the FDA only has a few left-over contracts, when they were once one of Mason State's largest customers.

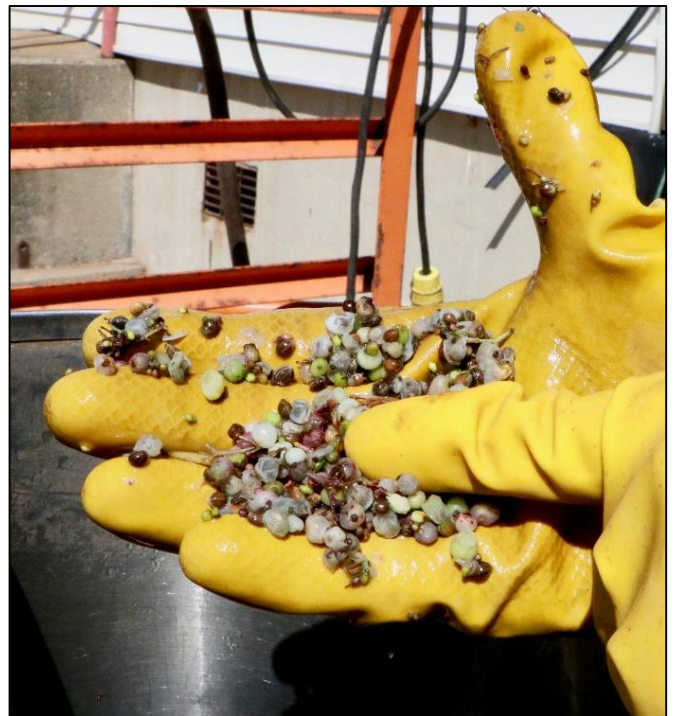


A variety of seed lay in drying racks as fans blow throughout the room, gently drying these little treasures at the nursery

Mason State Tree Nursery holds acres and acres of hidden treasure. It's unique in that it only grows native Illinois product, and can almost guarantee that no other plant invaders will be in their mixes. Since its inception, Mason State Tree Nursery has been dedicated to Illinois native plant life, but lack of funding and man-power threatens their thriving facility. With assistance in funding, marketing and getting their product out the door, Mason State can continue to thrive for many years to come.



Various unique machines are used to clean different types of seeds. This one uses water to wash away to the fleshy seed coating and the seeds stay in the container



Seed that has been separated from its outer coating and ready to be dried and stored until needed.