

ENVIRONMENT

AACC, Providence Center team to grow wetlands grasses

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Rows and rows of black trays, filled with potting soil. Small white dishes of sticky seeds. Dozens of pairs of helping hands.



Pamela Wood — The Capital

At the Providence Center in Arnold, clients Carver Jones of Annapolis, left, and Kathy Becker of Linthicum stack trays ready to be planted with seeds that will grow into wetlands grasses. Anne Arundel Community College and the Providence Center are teaming up to grow 75,000 wetlands grasses that will be planted at Poplar Island, a Chesapeake Bay island being restored as a nature sanctuary.

For hours Monday, greenhouses at the Providence Center in Arnold were abuzz with the work necessary to start off the latest order of plants: 75,000 plugs of wetlands grasses, *Spartina patens* and *Spartina alterniflora*.

All told, that's 1,520 trays of grasses - all bound for the [Poplar Island environmental-restoration site](#) in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay.

It's a record order for the greenhouse program at the Providence Center, a nonprofit organization that helps adults with developmental disabilities.

During the day, Providence Center staff and clients worked hard to fill the trays with potting soil. And they called in their partners at Anne Arundel Community College for a little extra help.

In the evening, students, staff and volunteers with the college planted the seeds - a delicate task that they were able to do more quickly than the Providence Center clients.

But after that, the grasses are back in the care of the Providence Center clients, who will water and tend to the plants through June, while they also are raising flowers and vegetables and other plants in their greenhouses.

Leslie Seibel, horticulture manager at Providence Center, said her clients thrive in the greenhouses. They learn job skills, earn money and get to help the greater community, especially when growing the wetlands plants.

"The more exposure they get to groups such as the college, the more they grow and learn," Seibel said.

After moving and stacking dozens of dirt-filled trays Monday, Providence Center client Kurt Walker of Arnold said he enjoyed working in the greenhouses.

"I like this better than pottery," he said.

Providence Center clients have been raising the wetlands plants for years with the help of the community college and Stephen Ailstock, a professor who heads the Environmental Center and the Department of Biology.

Ailstock and his students gather the grass seeds, store them and test their germination rates. Then the seeds are turned over to the Providence Center for raising and selling.

Ailstock said the college has the expertise to propagate and grow the plants, but with just a single greenhouse, there isn't the ability to do a large-scale growing operation.

Old idea

Ailstock hit upon the idea of partnering with the Providence Center's horticulture program back in the 1980s and they've been working together ever since. Clients have included neighborhood associations, nonprofit environmental groups and even the state.

For six years, the Providence Center has been growing plants for the Poplar Island project, which is run by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Maryland Port Administration.

The corps is paying about \$47,000 for the plants, said biologist Mark Mendelsohn. This is the third time the corps has bought plants from the Providence Center, and he said they are always good quality and well-priced.

It takes some extra administrative wrangling to sign a contract with the Providence Center because it is not competitively bid, but it's worth it, Mendelsohn said.

"It's the right thing to do," he said. "We like doing it."

The grasses will be planted by volunteers from the National Aquarium in Baltimore and state prison inmates in June, Mendelsohn said. The grasses will go on a four-acre site at Poplar Island, which is a massive restoration project.

The island, once nearly lost due to the bay's ravaging winds and tides, is being rebuilt as a nature sanctuary using dredged material from the bottom of the bay's shipping channels.

'Three bites'

Ailstock, of the community college, likes to say that with the program, you get "three bites of the

apple." That is, helping people with disabilities gain skills, teaching college students about wetlands plants and restoring the environment.

AACC assistant professor Jessamy Rango said the seed planting, though tedious, had an upside.

"It's kind of zenful."

Beside her, husband Shane Ratterman said the tricky part was getting the sticky seeds to cooperate - it can be difficult to spread the seeds out evenly.

Ratterman said his wife didn't have to do much convincing to get him to come along. He works for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and understands the importance of restoring wetlands, which filter polluted stormwater runoff and provide habitat for birds and critters.

Plus, he said, it's an opportunity "just to get my hands dirty and have fun."

AACC student Corey Truss of Arnold admitted that she came to help plant the seeds because she needed to make up for missing labs in Rango's environmental science class. But she found herself having fun alongside classmate Sarah Traylor of Davidsonville.

"I haven't been this dirty since I was 10," Traylor laughed.

The Providence Center's greenhouse and gift shop, at 370 Shore Acres Road in Arnold, is open to the public on weekdays from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. Saturday hours begin on April 11.

<http://www.hometownannapolis.com/news/env/2009/03/18-19/AACC-Providence-Center-team-to-grow-wetlands-grasses.html>