

Seed savers

Bloomer business focuses on rare, native wildflowers

By Megan Parker

Regional Editor

BLOOMER — Steve Sykora pulled a fuzzy tuft from a dried-up wildflower. He rubbed it in circles, separating the fuzz from black seeds no bigger than flecks of soil.

It's harvest time at Mr. Sykora's Everwilde Farms, a native wildflower and grass seed business near Bloomer in Chippewa County.

Mr. Sykora and his wife, Janelle, grow 100 wildflower and grass species on 12 acres, specializing in rare varieties.

"Even in the realm of native plantings, this is the best there is," Mr. Sykora said.

The Sykoras sell the seed mostly whole-sale. This year they added a retail division. Seeds have sold across the country through the company's Web site.

Mike Melgaard, owner of Prairie Hill Seeds in Hillsdale, grows 40 common prairie species for his planting business. Some rare varieties are harder to grow, so he supplements his stock with seed from Everwilde Farms.

"The seed I've gotten from (Mr. Sykora) is unbelievably good quality — very pure, very clean, very viable seed," Mr. Melgaard said.

Even in the realm of native plantings, this is the best there is.

— Steve Sykora, wildflower and grass seed farmer

For more information about Everwilde Farms, call (888) 848-3837 or visit www.everwilde.com.

This year Mr. Sykora harvested six pounds of starry campion seed. Before, only a few ounces existed in the Midwest. The Tennessee coneflowers he grows are federally endangered.

Mr. Sykora has added 10 wildflower mixes to meet retail demand. He considers bloom time, required sunlight and soil types when creating mixes.

"It's kind of an art to designing a mix that works," he said.

He also marks all of his seeds with their origin, and gets most of his seed from

the Upper Midwest.

The growing season at Everwilde Farms begins and ends in the greenhouse. The Sykoras start plants from seeds, transplanting them into the ground in May and June.

Mr. Sykora replants species about every five years. He also rotates plants and maintains seven acres about a mile away to prevent hybridization between similar species.

In the height of summer, fields are alive with dazzling color — and weeds. The



Steve Sykora yanked a weed last week from a field of blooming New England asters. The Sykoras are seeing success with permeable ground cloths that prevent weed growth. **Inset:** Steve and Janelle Sykora own Everwilde Farms, a native wildflower and grass seed business near Bloomer in Chippewa County. The Sykoras have 12 acres of 100 species that they grow for harvesting seeds. Their son, Jesse, is 8 months old.

Sykoras groan at the mention of weeding, an unending job in May and June.

Harvest starts in May and continues through

Thanksgiving because of the myriad of species grown at the farm.

Last week Mr. Sykora's sisters Carolyn and Catherine

Sykora and Mrs. Sykora's sister Sara Deatherage bent over rows of wild timothy, beating seed into plastic bins. Mr. Sykora said their grasses

and wildflowers, which ripen at uneven times, require several passes to collect all of the seed.

Dew, wind and rain prevent harvest. The Sykoras also fear hailstorms and strong wind.

Photo by Megan Parker

New England asters and pearly everlasting were in bloom last week, the lavender and white fields a contrast to the orange and russet leaves on nearby hillsides. Bumblebees droned, bouncing from flower to flower.

Mr. Sykora has seen the effect of this summer's drought. Irises yielded a pound of seed. Last year he got 40 pounds.

It's a business for patient people. Some flowers take several years to yield seed. Some seed sits in warehouses for years before selling. Some plants have never been grown in cultivation, which requires trial and error.

But it's evident Mr. Sykora loves his job. Last week, when two neighbors pattered up the Sykoras' driveway in an all-terrain vehicle, one confirmed Mr. Sykora's passion.

"That's probably the happiest farmer in Chippewa County," the neighbor said.

Mr. Sykora, who worked for an agricultural engineering firm while starting the seed company, said he itched to work outside. After high school he grew hay and wheat on his parents' acreage, but discovered he needed more land and equipment to make a living at farming. A friend told Mr. Sykora about the popularity of native wildflowers. He began growing for a Minnesota company.

Mr. Sykora said he enjoys spending time with family and the flexibility of owning his own business, even if the days are long.

"I can be at home and name my own hours, which is 15 hours a day," he said with a laugh.

Megan Parker may be reached at (800) 236-4004, ext. 3867 or megan.parker@ecpc.com.