

BLOOMER

*Acres of wildflowers
provide the seeds that make
Everwilde Farms a ...*

Growing business

By Megan Parker
Special to the Leader-Telegram

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 Sykora's Everwilde Farms, a native wildflower and grass seed business near Bloomer.

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," Sykora said.

The Sykoras sell the seed mostly wholesale. 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 (the Sykoras) is unbelievably good quality — very pure, very clean, very viable seed," Melgaard said.

This year the Sykoras harvested six pounds of starry campion seed. Before, only a few ounces existed in the Midwest. The Tennessee coneflowers they grow are federally endangered.

Everwilde has added 10 wildflower mixes to meet retail demand. They consider bloom time, required sunlight and soil types when creating mixes. "It's kind of an art to designing a mix that works," Steve Sykora said.

He also marks all his seeds with their origin and gets most of his seed from the Upper Midwest.

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

Steve Sykora said the best time to plant wildflowers from seed is in the fall.

They replant species about every five years. They also rotate plants and maintain seven acres about a mile away to prevent hybridization between species.

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



■ For more information about Everwilde Farms, call (888) 848-3837 or visit www.everwilde.com.
■ Fire damages Bay City seed business. Page 7F.



Above: Steve Sykora recently yanked a weed from a field of blooming New England asters. Steve and Janelle Sykora own Everwilde Farms, a native wildflower and grass seed business near Bloomer. **Left:** The

Sykoras have 12 acres with 100 species of grass and wildflowers 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 lasts through Thanksgiving because of their many species.

Recently, Steve's sisters Carolyn and Catherine Sykora and Janelle's sister Sara Deatherage bent over rows of wild timothy, beating seed into plastic bins. Steve 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.

New England asters and pearly everlastings were in bloom about a week ago, the lavender and white fields a contrast to the orange and russet leaves on nearby hillsides.

Bumblebees droned, bouncing from flower to flower.

Steve Sykora has seen the effect of this summer's drought. Irises yielded a pound of seed. Last year he got 40. Their overall seed yield is down 35 to 40 percent.

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 species never have been cultivated, resulting in trial and error.

But Steve Sykora loves his job. When two neighbors pattered up the Sykoras' driveway in an all-terrain vehicle, one confirmed Steve's passion.

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

Steve worked for an agricultural engineering firm while starting the seed company. 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 Sykora about the popularity of native wildflowers. He began growing for a Minnesota company.

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.

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Megan Parker photos