



Microscopic view of a nodding onion (*Allium cernuum*) seed at the Native Seed Nursery, Salt Creek Resource Management, Western Springs, Illinois, April 29, 2025. (Photo by Samantha Plencner)

Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois

Seeds of the Future

Amplifying and Collecting Native Seed for Priority Projects Across Cook County

In 2025, the Forest Preserves of Cook County's Seed Amplification Program (SAP), in collaboration with the Chicago Botanic Garden (the Garden), completed its second year of native seed production with expanded capacity, stronger partnerships, and measurable growth. Continuing to build on decades of volunteer stewardship and staff expertise, SAP strengthened the foundation of locally adapted, genetically diverse native seeds for long-term ecological restoration—advancing the goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan to restore and protect our region's natural landscapes for future generations.

- 86 lbs of seed produced from 19 species at the Native Seed Nursery
- 53 lbs collected from Rodeo Farm production beds
- 59.83 lbs collected from North West Resource Management graminoid beds
- 100+ species collected across 22 preserves
- 7 planting projects led or supported countywide
- 28 collections added to the Dixon Native Seed Bank at the Chicago Botanic Garden
- 330 lbs of native seed collected across Cook County as part of the program

Growing Capacity: Staff, Systems, and Seed Production

In 2025, the SAP strengthened its operational foundation and capacity, refining systems, and exponentially increasing seed production. Through continued collaboration with the Garden, SAP staff advanced collection, propagation, and data management to support restoration at scale.



Noah Hornak digs holes at the Salt Creek Landscape Maintenance Detention Basin in preparation of plug planting, North Riverside, Illinois, April 30, 2025 (Photo by Nina Fuentes)

Investing in Expertise

The Garden continued to be a critical partner in 2025, employing SAP staff and providing office space, lab access, additional seed storage, and data infrastructure. They also propagated and grew most seedlings for planting plugs for restorations and the nursery. In addition, their expertise and collaboration through weekly and quarterly meetings were invaluable. To reflect the program’s expanded scope, staff titles were updated to align with the full seed lifecycle—from collection to restoration.

Seed Amplification Program Manager: Molly Marz
Seed Amplification Program Technician: Noah Hornak
Weekly coordination + 4 quarterly updates

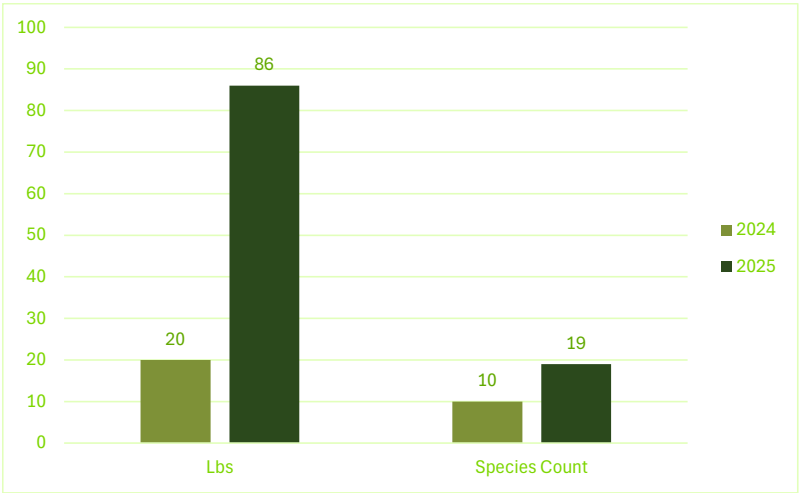
Four Times the Seed, One Year Later

The Native Seed Nursery produced four times more seeds in 2025 than in 2024, with multiple species flowering and seeding for the first time. This growth reflects both second-year bed plantings, scaled and improved seed set outcomes.

Carex hirtifolia (hairy wood sedge) – A sedge of mesic to dry woodlands and savannas, this species functions as a foundational groundcover in local ecosystems. Its dense growth stabilizes soil, suppresses invasive species and creates a resilient matrix that allows other flora to develop and thrive.

Elymus riparius (riverbank wild rye) - This native grass plays a critical role as a matrix species in woodland and savanna restorations. Riverbank wild rye establishes quickly and helps carry prescribed fire through restoration sites.

Nabalus albus (white lettuce) – A woodland forb that blooms from late summer into early fall, white lettuce fills an important seasonal gap for pollinators. Its flowering period supports insects during a critical time when many species are provisioning for the next generation and strengthening food web resilience.





Workers at Rodeo Farm in Chicago's Little Village community tend to native plants part of the SAP in 2025. (Photo provided by Chicago Botanic Garden)

Scaling Up Through Partnerships

At the Garden's Windy City Harvest's Rodeo Farm, SAP staff assumed primary management of a 4,200-square-foot native seed production bed. Working alongside the Garden's apprentices and interns, partner crews, and volunteers, the program collected 53 lbs of seed in 2025, matching the prior year's yield while expanding staff leadership and coordination.



8 Species in Production



53 lbs of native seed collected



Used exclusively for Forest Preserves of Cook County

Putting Seed Back on the Ground

SAP staff led or supported seven planting projects in 2025, moving seed and plugs from nursery and into restoration sites across Cook County.



7 sites



44 species planted



~ 14,700 plugs installed

- Wild Seed Gardens at Marley Creek & Salt Creek Landscape Maintenance Detention Basin
- Graminoid Beds at Northwest Resource Management
- Onsite restoration at Brookfield Woods, Chicago Portage National Historic Site, and Swallow Cliff Stairs
- Additions to the Native Seed Nursery

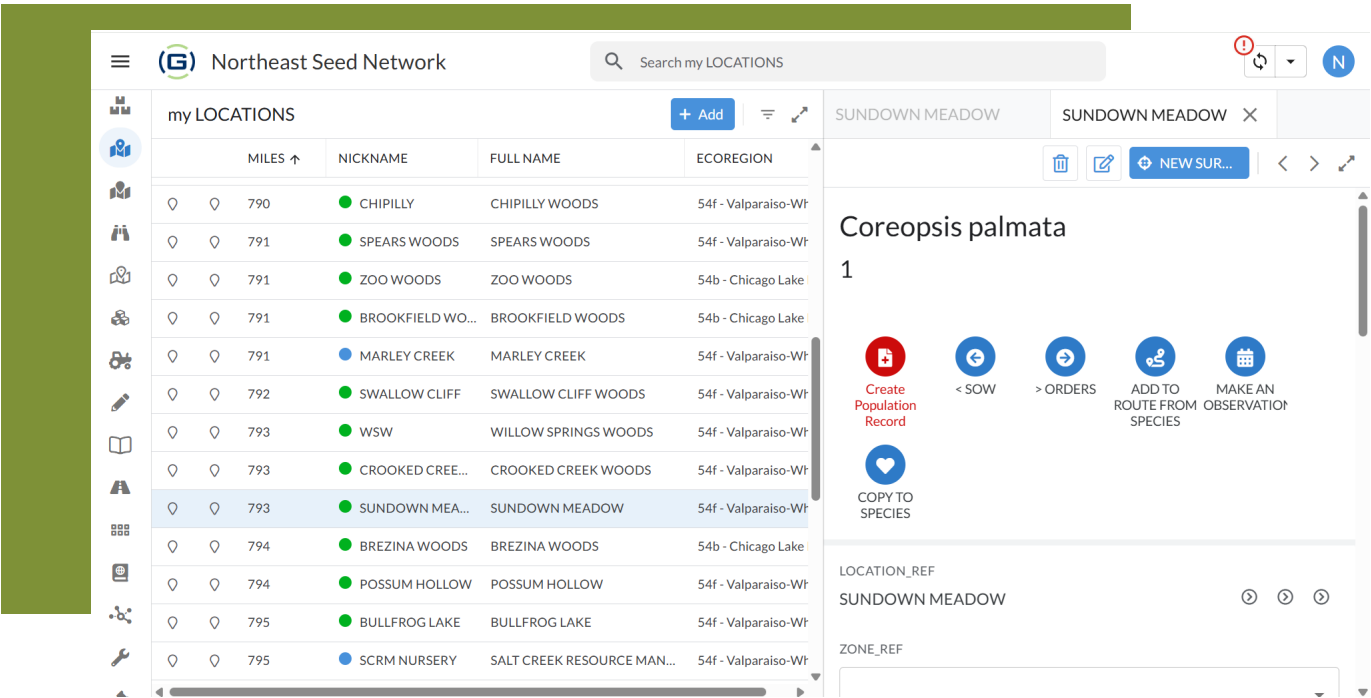
Expanding Wild Collection Across the County

In its second full collection season, SAP gathered over 65 lbs of seed from 100+ species across 22 sites, including species from the Garden's Plants of Concern rare plant monitoring program. A standout achievement: small sundrops (*Oenothera perennis*)—planted at SCRM for the first time in 2025—amplified from just 0.009 grams of seed to 47 grams, a 5,500-fold increase.

4 Plants of Concern species collected

Targeted for grow-out, banking, and onsite dispersal

Building the Seed Network of the Future



Screenshot of the ArcheWild dashboard, the central tool used by the SAP to track seed collection efforts in 2025.

Innovation & Learning

Forest Preserves staff, in partnership with the Garden, along with other partners continue to build regional leadership in native seed systems. In 2025, staff presented program lessons at the National Native Seed Conference and were active members of the Midwest Native Seed Network. They also strengthened transparency, planning, and accountability by transitioning to ArcheWild, a specialized database that tracks seed sources from collection through restoration.



Molly Marz explains the planting day plan to a group of Forest Preserves staff, volunteers and partners at the Marley Creek site in Tinley Park, Illinois, May 7, 2025. (Photo by Nina Fuentes)

What's Next

- Complete data migration into ArcheWild
- Expand wild seed gardens and production beds
- Increase restoration-driven seed collection
- Continue building internal nursery capacity though volunteer involvement
- Increase seed bank storage capacity
- Continue focusing on strengthening the regional native seed network by sharing lessons learned

Together with partners, staff, and volunteers, the Seed Amplification Program is building a resilient, locally adapted seed supply—rooted in stewardship and growing toward the future.