

UF releases ornamental peanut plants for use as lawn, groundcover

June 29 2010, by Tom Nordlie

Homeowners tired of watering, fertilizing and mowing grass have a new low-maintenance lawn option -- peanuts.

No, it's not the crunchy snack. And these plants don't produce food.

University of Florida researchers say a plant called rhizoma perennial peanut is gaining popularity as a groundcover. A distant cousin of the well-known crop, perennial peanut is already used to produce livestock forage and hay. Some types make a hardy, attractive lawn or groundcover.

To spur interest, UF's Institute of Food and [Agricultural Sciences](#) has released two rhizoma perennial peanuts for ornamental use, Arblick and Ecoturf. They are formally announced in the current issue of Journal of Plant Registrations.

Both grow low to the ground and produce dense green foliage with small yellow-orange flowers, said Ann Blount, an associate professor with UF's North Florida Research and Education Center in Marianna.

The plants were released into the public domain, so anyone may buy, sell or grow them.

Ken Quesenberry, a retired UF agronomist who's studied the crop for years, points out that some plants marketed as perennial peanut do not grow from communal root systems, called rhizomes.

Those root systems help the plant withstand heavy foot traffic and allow them to bounce back from winter frost. Sometimes called pinto perennial peanut, the non-rhizoma plants are suitable for South Florida but aren't as cold-tolerant as rhizoma varieties, he said.

Researchers didn't breed the plants—instead, they collected wild specimens in South America in the 1950s, Blount said. For decades afterward, UF agronomists Tito French and Gordon Prine studied these and other perennial peanuts as potential livestock forages and hay crops; in recent years they began providing samples to commercial sod producers.

Blount hopes the new perennial peanuts catch on, because only one forage variety is widely grown in the state. Called Florigraze, it's produced on about 30,000 acres.

“UF made a conscious effort to broaden the genetic diversity of perennial peanut by giving these plants away,” she said.

Here's why: If too many people grow genetically identical plants, one disease or pest could potentially destroy them all. When multiple varieties are grown, there's less risk.

Fortunately, rhizoma perennial peanuts are tough. They require about half the water turfgrass does, and need little fertilizer—like most legumes, rhizoma perennial peanuts produce their own nitrogen.

UF is evaluating almost 40 rhizoma perennial peanuts, some of them suited to ornamental use, he said. Researchers hope to identify shade-tolerant varieties, which would expand the crop's potential for home lawns.

Quesenberry said it's anyone's guess whether perennial peanut will ever

rival turfgrass in popularity. But the legume will probably get attention in communities with water restrictions, he said.

Some businesses install perennial peanut lawns and many consumers are intrigued, said Jerry Stageman, an owner of Sunset Specialty Groundcover in Jacksonville. But recent economic woes have slowed sales, he said.

“People just don’t have as much money to spend right now,” said Stageman, who grows about 50 acres of ornamental perennial peanut and installs it statewide.

Greater public awareness could boost demand, said Steve Basford, a Jackson County-based grower and president of the Perennial Peanut Producers Association.

Another possibility is that perennial peanut and turfgrass could be grown together in lawns, which might reduce the need for nitrogen fertilizer, said Gary Knox, a professor at UF’s North Florida Research and Education Center in Quincy.

“We’re just getting started exploring the possibilities,” Knox said. “It looks like a sure winner when we come up with the right varieties.”

Provided by University of Florida

Citation: UF releases ornamental peanut plants for use as lawn, groundcover (2010, June 29) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-uf-ornamental-peanut-lawn-groundcover.html>

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