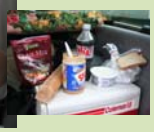
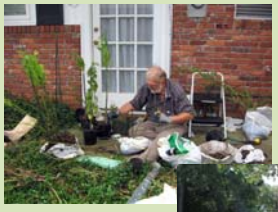
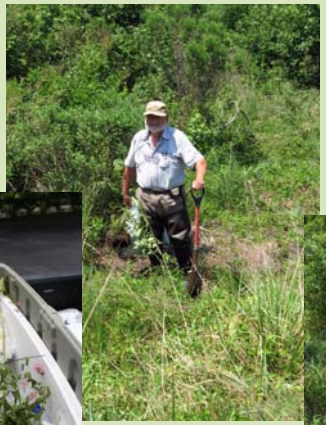
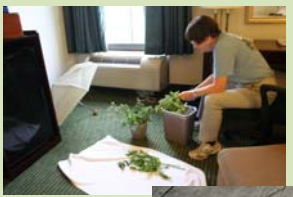
The Hunt for Pink September



To gather the range of genetic variation in seashore mallow we ventured on a trip to hunt for specimens growing along the latitudinal gradient of its range (New Jersey to Florida). Seashore mallow is a minor plant species found most frequently in brackish marshes. Because it is not a dominant plant in the marsh it is very difficult to spot when it is not flowering. Therefore our collecting trip had to take place in August and September. But, exactly where to look?

To increase our chances of finding it we visited numerous herbaria to determine where botanists had collected it in the past. The specimens in these collections went back into the 1800s. With the information recorded on the herbarium sheets, our volunteer, Dave Lewis, used Google Earth to locate the sites and print out a map that we then used, along with county maps and GPS, to find the populations of seashore mallow.

Plants and seeds were then collected and stored in a plastic box cooled with ice as we continued our travels. When it was possible to collect whole plants we did so and potted them up with potting soil to increase their chance of survival throughout the trip. In addition to the dug plants, we made cuttings to take back to UD and packaged the seed collected from each site where available.

Upon our return to UD we turned the plants over to Donna Hamilton, a biologist in the Halophyte Biotechnology Center, who is now caring for them in the greenhouse. Next spring some of them will be moved to field plots irrigated with saltwater. These plant selections will be studied and crosses made among them to find or develop a plant line with all the characteristics desired for a salt-tolerant biofuel/feed crop.