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Sea-bean enthusiasts converge at festival

Event draws visitors from state, U.S.

BY KING QUILLEN
FOR FLORIDA TODAY

You're most likely to find beachcombers and bean seekers on sandy shores, but this month they surged into the Cocoa Beach Public Library, boosting attendance figures by almost 1,000 during a two-day event.

They hopped planes and packed cars, traveling here from such states as North Carolina, Texas and Washington state. They drove from Fort Lauderdale and Jacksonville and drifted in from Melbourne and Cocoa Beach.

The occasion was the 11th annual Sea Bean Symposium and Beachcombers' Festival on Oct. 13 and 14. It showcased the seeds, nuts and fruits that drop from trees and vines in faraway lands, bob across seas and finally wash ashore.

Exhibits displayed sea beans that had been collected, polished, photographed, made into jewelry and categorized in books.

Many people who attended were sea bean collectors.

John Tobison of Cocoa Beach said he has collected about a dozen varieties during beach walks. Some of his success is due to his location, according to Ed Perry, conference organizer.

"Florida's east coast is possibly the single best place in the world for finding things that drift in the oceans," said Perry, who lives in Melbourne.

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Size comparison. Bonnie Miller of Melbourne, left, and her sister, Mary Browning, try to identify sea beans they found by comparing them with the bean-o-matic at the Sea Bean Symposium and Beachcombers' Festival. King Quillen, for FLORIDA TODAY

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For information about the Sea Bean Symposium and Beachcombers' Festival, visit the Web site www.seabean.com

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Mary Browning, originally from Melbourne, agreed. She now lives in North Carolina, but returns to Melbourne to visit her sister, Bonnie Miller, and seek beans at local beaches.

"It's addicting," said Browning. "I'm 53 years old and I still walk (the beach) looking at the ground."

Like many visitors, Browning brought along an unusual sea bean, hoping someone could name it and tell her what plant shed it and where it grew.

"There is a science behind the fun and there are answers to those questions," said Perry. "We don't know everything, and that is fun because what we don't know, we can find out."

Symposium participants learned how teachers use sea beans in geography, botany and math classes. They attended programs about manmade objects that clutter the ocean and West Coast beachcombing. And they competed for prizes such as "cool bean" and "best non-bean."

But the event was about more than having fun or seeking scientific knowledge.

"I hope they (attendees) will take away from this a love for nature and the outdoors, and hopefully, the inspiration to go out and get involved," Perry said.



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