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- Community
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- Auto
- Real Estate
- Employment
- Classifieds
- Local Shopping
- Special Sections

Home > Local > The return of the American chestnut tree

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The return of the American chestnut tree

Local

Source: Fauquier Times-Democrat
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11 2008

Prior to the early 1900s, the American chestnut tree was the tree. It was nearly everything to the early settlers and our decedents of only a 100 years past.

To start with, American chestnut was a reliable food source. While most nut-bearing forest trees have a good nut crops every two or three years, wildlife and humans alike could count on a good chestnut crop every year. These nuts were very high in protein and sweeter than the Asian or European varieties.

American chestnut was highly valued for its wood. For starters, it was as rot-proof as wood can get. Chestnut fence posts and boards can still be found.

It was also not bothered by insects, making it a very durable building material as lumber, roof shingles, fencing, wagons, etc. The wood also split and burned easily, making it a must-have for the fireplace.



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Even the bark and leaves were valued. Bark was stripped and sold or used on the farm to tan hides. The leaves were so important they were even included in the U.S. Pharmacopoeia and known to pharmacologists as *extractum castanea fluidum* to treat various burns and rashes.

What happened?

So what happened to the American chestnut? The Asian chestnut happened.

A few Chinese chestnut trees were brought to the Bronx Zoo in New York with the idea of greater nut production. The Asian chestnut trees are a small-to-medium sized tree which is a good characteristic if nut production is the primary goal.

Unfortunately, as is so often the case, the introduction of these trees in 1905 also introduced another non-native — the blight fungus.

Most fungi in their native region do not cause serious harm to the native vegetation in that same region. This same fungus, however, caused catastrophic harm to American chestnuts, which had no natural defense to the new exotic.

By 1909, the blight was documented 400 miles away in Bedford, Virginia spread by wind, rain and birds. By 1940, 3.5 billion American chestnuts had caught the blight and died.

Chestnut trees,, like most deciduous trees re-sprout as a method of regeneration. Because of this, we still have native American chestnut in the forests — actually quite a lot of it — but it's all small stuff.

After a few years' growth, the sprouts get the blight, then die back and re-sprout again. This cycle has been going on for decades, but the root systems supporting the sprouts are getting weaker.

Fortunately, researchers and volunteers began working on the restoration of the American chestnut as soon as the magnitude of this biological disaster was understood. Today, there are two primary strategies to breed a blight-resistant (never say blight-proof) American chestnut.

Crossbreed

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The American Chestnut Foundation, the Virginia Department of Forestry, and others are developing advanced hybrids by crossing Chinese and American chestnut.

Through multiple backcrossings, where the Chinese-X-American is crossed back to the American again to result in a first generation, a ¾ American-X-¼ Chinese chestnut tree.

This series of crossings has been done three times to result in 15/16 American chestnut trees.

The most blight-resistant of these are then crossed with each other. This breeding method is designed to breed in only the desirable genes from the Chinese chestnut tree...the ones that make it resistant to the blight.

A different breeding program is being undertaken by the American Chestnut Cooperators' Foundation (ACCF), Virginia Tech and others.

This program operates on the premise that some American chestnut trees seem to be resistant...the right terminology is "have escaped the blight," and so these trees are being cross-bred to select for native resistance to the blight. The ACCF calls this strategy the "All-American intercrosses."

Interestingly, both methods have something in common — Virginia.

Virginia is a leader in the effort to restore the American chestnut to its native woodland habitat. Whoever and by whatever means the goal is reached, the return of this giant is welcome and perhaps not too far off.

According to Professor Gary Griffin at Virginia Tech, "It is not beyond the grasp of science to restore the American chestnut to economic importance. It could be accomplished within the next 50 years."

Upcoming event

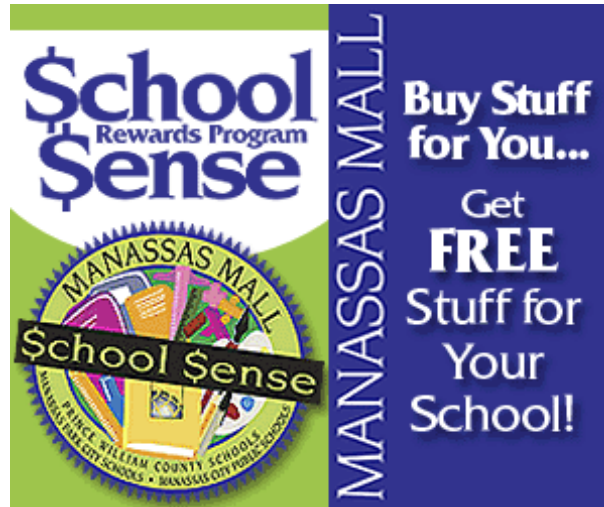
Native Birds in the garden

This lecture will talk about attracting native birds, including bluebirds, tree swallows, chickadees and titmice, that are beneficial; providing housing and food through cultivation of native plants in the landscape as well as birdhouses and gourds; avoiding use of broad-spectrum insecticides and discouraging predators like feral cats and raccoons and competitors like the European starling and English house sparrow.

Join Master Gardener Tree Greenwood on Sunday, Feb. 24 at 3 p. m. at the Bealeton Library for this free program.

Adam Downing is the Natural Resources Extension Agent for the Northern District. He can be reached at (540) 948-6881.

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