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## Governor's mansion planting may revive American chestnut

*Paul Clark*

A small American chestnut tree dedicated at the Governor's Western Residence on Friday will be the forerunner of a new crop of giant chestnut trees throughout North Carolina, its caretakers hope.

First lady Mary Easley dedicated the 3-foot, 3-year-old tree in the hopes that the blight resistance built into it genetically will help the tree flourish throughout the Appalachian Mountains once again.

There were once more than 4 billion American chestnut trees in the United States, according to the American Chestnut Foundation. One out of every four trees in the Appalachian forests was a chestnut. From Maine to Mississippi, American chestnut trees thrived and matured as the dominant species, towering over oaks, hickories and tulip poplars. And they were huge.

Many foresters considered the American chestnut the most useful tree in the woods because it provided food for wild animals and livestock, a cash crop for mountain farmers, a light, yellow-colored wood for furniture and rot-resistant lumber for fences, utility poles and siding.

In 1904, the chestnut blight disease, caused by an Asian fungus, was discovered in the Bronx Zoo in New York. The blight spread quickly by air and on the bodies of insects, birds and animals. By the 1930s, almost all the mature chestnut trees in the Carolinas were dying back to their roots. Now, with an approach called backcross breeding, the American Chestnut Foundation and its Carolinas chapter are working to revive the tree. They hope within a decade to have blight-resistant trees ready for testing in the Carolinas. The foundation donated the tree that Easley dedicated Friday.

"This tree is almost a legend, isn't it?" she said to the dozen onlookers.

On the net: [www.acf.org](http://www.acf.org).