

Groups hope to re-establish Ozark chinquapins

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By LARRY STROUD

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BATESVILLE, Ark. — Chinquapin nuts are falling, and two groups that are trying to re-establish chinquapin trees in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri would like to have some of the few seeds that will be available.

Gerry Cormier of Cabot and Stephen Bost of Poplar Bluff, Mo., are looking for surviving Ozark chinquapin trees that are large enough to flower and produce nuts.

Cormier and Bost said trees old enough to bear nuts may be carrying some natural resistance to the chestnut blight that killed virtually all chinquapins to their roots in the late 1950s.

Both men are trying to re-establish Ozark chinquapins - sometimes spelled "chinkapins" - in the trees' former range.

Chestnuts and chinquapins are cousin species and, like chestnuts, chinquapin nuts grow spines on their exteriors.

Through the years, many of the chinquapins have kept growing back from the roots, but even the most hardy of those shoots die after seven to 10 years from the blight, which destroys the inner bark, usually near the bottom of the sapling's trunk. Then, the roots put out more shoots.

Some of those shoots get old enough to produce nuts that might carry more resistance to the blight than did the parent tree.

Cormier began work with the Ozark Initiative, associated with the American Chestnut Foundation, about a year and a half ago. Bost works with the Ozark Chinquapin Foundation.

The two approach their restoration efforts differently, but share information, pollen and seeds they collect. The pollen is used to artificially pollinate flowers on trees that may be many miles apart to, as Bost says, "try to leapfrog the genetics" to create a blight resistant or blight-free strain of chinquapin many years quicker than could occur naturally.

Bost's group works only with pure Ozark chinquapin specimens in order to keep the Ozark strain pure.

Cormier's group is willing to crossbreed the Ozark chinquapin with blight-resistant varieties of chestnuts in order to build up the resistance of the finished crossbred product.

Cormier was in Sharp, Independence and IZard counties during the spring to collect pollen from two trees in Cave City and a tree near Oxford, and examine some trees in Independence County. The Independence County trees show promise of being old enough to flower next year.

Cormier also took leaf samples and recorded each tree's location on a Global Positioning System unit.

The leaf samples were sent to the University of Tennessee for DNA analysis, so a DNA database for Ozark chinquapins can be established.

Dale Mobley, whose two trees at Cave City voluntarily came up a few yards apart a few years ago, helped Cormier collect pollen from those trees this spring.

Some of the pollen was refrigerated before being transferred to paper bags that were tucked inside loosely folded plastic bags and were mailed to Bost.

Meticulous records are kept as to the origin of the introduced pollen and which test tree flowers were pollinated with it.

In addition, both men are trying a relatively new technique to try to get blight-infected trees to live longer, or perhaps even heal. The process is called mud packing and involves taking dirt from near the tree, mixing it with water and packing it over the swollen, infected bark (cankers) at the base of the tree, then using a rubber spray to hold it in place.

Eventually, the rubber spray disintegrates and, hopefully, the blight cankers have been contained rather than spreading.

Last week, Cormier was back at Mobley's place in Cave City and at Band Mill in IZard County collecting nuts that were beginning to fall, and clipping branches containing nuts from high in the trees.

"We have found, at least with American chestnuts, that they mature fine even if they are harvested a little sooner than they would naturally fall out," Cormier said. "We cut them off the trees and leave them in the burs until they open naturally. Squirrels don't like us."

Squirrels love the nuts and often inadvertently "plant" chinquapins by burying nuts to eat later, but never returning to them.

Cormier said he is willing to return to the area to gather nuts from other trees, if he gets calls from readers who have chinquapin nuts currently maturing. He will also share those with Bost.

Anyone who has such trees may contact him at: Gerry Cormier, Ozark Initiative, 477 Old Country Lane, Cabot, AR 72023, or by calling 501-605-0387 or e-mailing [gcornier\(at\)att.net](mailto:gcornier(at)att.net).

Or, readers who are willing to collect nuts from their trees may put them in a container labeled with their names, contact information and location of the tree, and leave the containers with Mobley at Mobley's Paint & Hardware store at Cave City or with Larry Stroud at the Batesville Daily Guard newspaper office. The containers will be forwarded to Cormier and Bost.

A different container should be used for nuts from each tree.