

FALLS VILLAGE

Bringing back the mighty American chestnut tree

By PATRICK L. SULLIVAN

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FALLS VILLAGE —Tucked away in a clearing in a quiet corner of Falls Village are 300 American chestnut saplings, part of an ongoing effort to breed a new, improved tree that will be resistant to the chestnut blight that decimated the local tree population decades ago.

Ellery “Woods” Sinclair, tree guru, and Kendra Gurney from the American Chestnut Foundation were on hand to demonstrate the project to a group last Saturday as part of a series of educational walks sponsored by the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area. The tour was one of many Heritage Walks held over the past few weeks in Litchfield and Berkshire county towns.

Until relatively recently, the American chestnut represented one in five hardwood trees in forests in the eastern United States, said Sinclair. And as settlers cleared fields, the chestnut, a light-seeking species, flourished.

“It was an incredibly significant tree,” Sinclair explained. “It was the primary wood for beams — if you have an old house, chances are the beams are chestnut.”

Because the trees grew tall and straight, they were used for ships’ masts and telegraph — later telephone — poles. And because the wood was highly resistant to rot, it was employed for railroad ties and coffins.

Chestnuts represented a major food source for wildlife, and were a prized cash crop at Christmas. (Would Nat King Cole have been just another crooner without the chestnut?)

So what happened?

In the late 1890s, Chinese chestnuts were imported for ornamental use on the estates of the wealthy, and specimens were included in the collections of major botanical gardens.

It was at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden that the disease was first spotted, according to Sinclair. A fatal canker on the trees was spread by a fungus from the Asian imports, and the American chestnut had almost no resistance.

By 1950, some 4 billion trees on about 9 million acres of eastern forests had been wiped out by the blight.

Gurney explained that the Falls Village stand contains saplings that are 15/16 American chestnut, the result of careful breeding and selection.

“In five years we will deliberately infect these trees with both a strong and weak strain of the fungus. Maybe three of 100 trees will be selected to continue,” she stated, adding that the final group will be about 95.7 percent resistant to the fungus: The trees either won’t get sick at all or the lesions will heal over.

“We’re not trying to breed a tree that won’t get sick at all, but one that will heal and grow and be useful.”

Both Sinclair and Gurney noted the invaluable help of students from Housatonic Valley Regional High School, who planted the saplings and constructed the informational kiosk at the site.

And the students will be able to see the results of their work, said Sinclair (who taught English at the school for many years). “We tell the kids that they and their kids will see American chestnuts back in the forests.”