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Pulaski yard a lab for Chestnut tree experiment

Local News

By **BILL MARDIS**, Editor Emeritus

Commonwealth Journal

A front yard in southern Pulaski County has become another laboratory in an effort to re-establish American chestnut trees in eastern forests.

Female flowers (small burrs) on an American chestnut tree in Randall Albright's yard on Lost Lodge Road have recently been pollinated with male flowers (catkins) and bagged. Hopefully, the pollinated flowers will produce chestnuts that will sprout into partially blight-free trees.

Arthur Tucker, a retired lumber company owner and member of the Kentucky Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation, assisted with bagging the blooms. He said the male flowers came from another tree in Virginia.

Chestnut trees bloom from mid-June to early July, depending on the location and elevation. A chestnut tree rarely self-pollinates. It takes at least two chestnut trees in the same vicinity for viable nut production.

The experimental sprout, about 15-20 feet tall, has grown from an American chestnut tree which Albright brought with him from McCreary County when he moved to Lost Lodge Road in the early 1960s. The original tree had a trunk about 18 inches in diameter near the ground when it succumbed to the blight and had to be taken down. The existing sprout grew from that trunk.

The American chestnut early in the 20th century was the most important tree in the forest from Maine to Georgia and from the Piedmont west to the Ohio Valley.




Wildlife depended on the American chestnut's abundant crop of nuts. Its timber was used for virtually everything including telephone poles, fences, railroad ties, shingles, fine furniture

Photos



Arthur Tucker, retired lumber company owner and member of the Kentucky Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation, checks bagged flowers on an American chestnut tree sprout in Randall Albright's front yard on Lost Lodge Road. The flowers were pollinated and enclosed in bags as part of an effort to produce a blight-resistant tree. **Bill Mardis photo/Commonwealth Journal** (Click for larger image)

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and musical instruments.

A lethal fungus, accidentally imported from Asia in 1904, spread rapidly over the chestnut's range. By 1950, all that remained in the fungi's wake were huge, ghostlike trunks extending above the forest canopy.

The fungi killed the trees, but not the roots. Sprouts continue to grow from the roots, but the blight, surviving in oak trees, takes its toll on young chestnut trees. The fungi do not affect the oaks.

The American Chestnut Foundation, using volunteers like Tucker, have a breeding program under way to produce blight-resistant American chestnut trees. Tucker is caretaker of 243 American chestnut sprouts planted on an acre of land behind his house on Tucker Road in Bronston. The sprouts, growing rapidly, will be injected with the fungi that kill the trees to determine the resistance to the blight and find probably eight or 10 trees that are blight resistant.

The goal of The American Chestnut Foundation is to restore the American chestnut to eastern forests. Breeding orchards in affected states will produce blight-resistant American chestnuts suitable for each location.



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