



Seeds sown; now it's up to nature

Group plants chestnut trees to re-establish species

Intelligencer Journal

Published: Apr 07, 2008

By MADELYN PENNINO, staff writer

Filled with a deep sense of purpose, scores of volunteers spent a blustery morning Sunday planting seeds in a Martic Township field.

Their mission was to help re-establish Lancaster County's population of chestnut trees, which used to cover the region's rolling hills.

About 40 volunteers from conservation organizations, including the Pennsylvania American Chestnut Foundation, Lancaster County Conservancy and the National Wild Turkey Federation spent the day planting seeds from several hybrids of Chinese and American chestnut seeds.

Tim Eck, a member of the Pennsylvania American Chestnut Foundation, said bringing chestnut trees back from near extinction is his pet project.

"There's a commercial need for chestnut wood," Eck said. "It doesn't rot easily. Each one of these is going to turn into a nice telephone pole someday."

The American chestnut once comprised a quarter of all trees in Pennsylvania. But a fungus accidentally imported in the late 1800s decimated the species along the East Coast within 50 years.

The Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation uses backcross breeding to create blight-resistant American chestnuts suitable for planting here. It takes a minimum of six breeding generations — each five to 10 years in duration — to produce seeds with the right genetic mix.

On Sunday, about 1,200 seeds from a stand of hybrid trees in State College were planted over 2 acres of the 98-acre House Rock Nature Preserve in Martic Township, which is owned by Lancaster County Conservancy.

Neighboring Reed Run Preserve already contains a four-year-old chestnut tree orchard.

Eck, a lab supervisor at Alcoa's Lancaster plant, secured a \$25,000 grant for the project through the Alcoa Foundation.

Many of Eck's co-workers volunteered for Sunday's effort, including Tony Madonna of Lancaster.

"It's for the cause," Madonna said. "Bringing nature back to life is good."

His wife, Sharon, agreed.

"I believe in conservancy and helping the environment," she said. "We're kind of nature people."

Tom Stahl, a forester with Lancaster County Conservancy, said many aspects of the environment will benefit from the return of chestnut trees.

"This is about land preservation," Stahl, of Marticville, said. "It helps control the environment and protects things like the Susquehanna watershed."

Stahl's teenage son, Chris, said he volunteered because he is concerned that not enough is being done to protect the environment,

"I don't want to see this planet go bad," Chris said.

Volunteers planted the seeds, and then set up plastic tubes for the seedlings to grow through to protect them against squirrels, deer and natural substances in the environment that could impede their success.

Don Robertson, president of the Pennsylvania division of national conservation organization Izaak Walton League of America, said he is proud to be part of an effort to help chestnut trees thrive once more.

"This is a project that is dear to all of us," Robertson, of York, said. "We lost the American chestnut. It is our job to get it back."

If the chestnut seeds grow and thrive, Robertson said, they will multiply on their own.

"Chestnut trees will bring nature back to balance," he said.

Ray Keck, a member of the Red Rose Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation, said planting chestnut trees also will help sustain the state's wildlife population.

"I want to pass on the wildlife that we have here to future generations," Keck said.

Eck said one of the reasons he finds the project so fulfilling is because it is finite.

"We've set a goal, and we are going to accomplish it," Eck said. "In 15 years, we will have restored a species."

E-mail: mpennino@lnpnews.com

