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## Experts hope to develop blight-resistant chestnut tree

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HARPERS FERRY, W.Va. - Among hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts, stories often revolved around the American chestnut tree.

The trees could be massive at times, and the wood was sought after for furniture, fences and railroad ties.

The tree's nuts — tucked inside a green prickly burr — were a treat and became a cash crop for many, said Laurie Potteiger, information services manager for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

"It was probably the most versatile, valuable tree in the forest," Potteiger said.

But a blight threatened the existence of the chestnut in the early 1900s and it ended up wiping out mature trees, Potteiger said.

The blight did not affect roots and the American Chestnut tree still sprouts, but the blight eventually takes over the tree, Potteiger said.

Now there is an effort to bring the American chestnut back.

Experts are working to develop a blight-resistant chestnut tree by crossing a Chinese chestnut tree with the American chestnut, Potteiger said.

Hikers on the nearby Appalachian Trail and other outdoor enthusiasts can help in the effort, Potteiger said.

Tree experts want to examine different young American chestnut trees because there are different strains of the blight, Potteiger said.

The effort to bring back the American chestnut was part of the focus over the weekend in Harpers Ferry as the Appalachian Trail Conservancy celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Appalachian Trail's designation as the first national scenic trail by the National Trails System Act.

The Appalachian Trail is a 2,175-mile hiking trail from Maine to Georgia that passes through Harpers Ferry. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy, based in Harpers Ferry, is a volunteer-based organization that works cooperatively with 30 clubs to maintain the trail.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is working with The American Chestnut Foundation to bring back a blight-resistant chestnut tree and on Saturday, visitors to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's visitors center at 799 Washington St. were able to see a presentation about the effort, according to a news release.

"The return of the American chestnut to its former niche in the Appalachian hardwood forest ecosystem is a major restoration project that requires a multifaceted effort involving 6,000 members and volunteers, research, sustained funding and most important, a sense of the past and a hope for the future," according to a mission statement on The American Chestnut Foundation's Web site at [www.acf.org](http://www.acf.org).

On the Web site, people are told how they can take a twig from an American chestnut tree and send it to The American Chestnut Foundation for analysis.

The American Chestnut Foundation harvested its first blight-resistant nuts in 2005 and the organization hopes to begin reforestation trials of an American chestnut-type tree by the end of the decade, the Web site states.

It is believed the American chestnut tree was once a big part of the landscape in the Harpers Ferry area, Potteiger said. A hint to its existence is Chestnut Hill Road, which turns off U.S. 340 next to the Shenandoah River, Potteiger said.

But man's desire for the timber also made it hard for the American chestnut to thrive, Potteiger said.

"The hillsides (in Harpers Ferry) were bare if you look at Civil War photos," Potteiger said.

## Want to help?

People can help bring back the American chestnut by cutting springs off young trees and sending them to The American Chestnut Foundation for analysis. The foundation's Web site is [www.acf.org](http://www.acf.org).

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