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Beyond the blight

May 11, 2008

By Susan Smallheer Staff Writer

WEATHERSFIELD — Randy Knight always has been fascinated with chestnut trees and science projects.

On Saturday, his two interests came together as more than 250 American chestnut sprouts were planted in what will be a giant research project in a field at High Shelter Farm.

About two dozen volunteers from Vermont and New Hampshire planted an American chestnut tree orchard on his farm on Saturday, as part of the continuing effort to restore what was once a dominant tree in the Northeast.

The American Chestnut was all but wiped out 100 years ago by a blight. Most surviving chestnut trees only are found deep in the forest.

The sprouted nuts for the Weathersfield restoration project came from some of the surviving American chestnut trees in Vermont, which were cross-pollinated with disease-resistant strains from the American Chestnut Tree Foundation, or with Chinese or Japanese chestnuts. The foundation says it hopes to produce trees with most of the characteristics of the American chestnut and a built-in resistance to the deadly blight.

The sprouts are expected to grow about a foot the first year, and a foot or two every year thereafter. At High Shelter Farm, sprouted chestnuts were planted with scientific precision in a giant grid of eight rows, hundreds of yards long in the sheep pasture, which has a view of Mount Ascutney.

Colored flags differentiated the nuts from a massive tree in Thetford and those from a surviving American Chestnut in Colchester.

Knight and his wife, Grace, donated the pasture because of their lifelong interest in the rare tree.

"I'm in a position that I could do this. I'm trained in science and this mixes a number of interests of mine," said Knight, an emergency room physician at nearby Valley Regional Hospital in Claremont, N.H.

Each sprouted nut was planted about an inch deep, in a special potting soil mixture of peat moss, perlite, sheep manure and soil. A small cage of hardware cloth protects each planting; wooden stakes identify the heritage of the nut.

Knight, who is an amateur farmer, plans to keep his sheep and free-range chickens in the chestnut orchard to control the grass and insects and to fertilize the pasture. Once the seedlings are established, he will install more protective cages to keep the sheep at bay. He will be tending the orchard with help from Terry Gulick of Springfield.

The giant planting operation on Saturday was organized by Leila Pinchot, the New England regional science coordinator for the American Chestnut Foundation, which is headquartered in Bennington.

Pinchot, a graduate student at the Yale School of Forestry, said she used the computer program Excel to imitate a more natural planting pattern.

Once the trees are a certain size, the blight fungus will be introduced, and the trees will be evaluated for their resistance to the disease, Pinchot said.

The Weathersfield chestnut tree planting is the second such orchard in Vermont, Pinchot said. The first was established at Shelburne Farms in 2005.

Kendra Gurney, a graduate student at the University of Vermont, will be taking Pinchot's place in a week. She said there are dozens of small chestnut orchards in the Northeast.

A Vermont/New Hampshire chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation only was recently formed. Nationwide, there are 14 chapters dedicated to the restoration of

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the American chestnut.

The American chestnut was part of the tree family that includes the oak and beech, but it is not related to the American horse chestnut tree, despite its name, Gurney said. The two trees have different flowers, and the horse chestnut produces a bitter, inedible nut. She said the flowers of the American chestnut more closely resemble a white birch catkin, rather than the large conical flowerhead produced by the horse chestnut.

The American chestnut tree often is described as the "king of the forest," because of its valuable timber, nuts for wildlife, and its regal bearing.

She and Pinchot said the Knights' field is an ideal place to grow chestnuts because it is well drained and has southern and eastern exposures. The Connecticut River Valley and the Champlain Valley were once home turf of the American chestnut.

Volunteer Wendy Regier of Proctorsville has her own mini chestnut orchard at home. Her mother was an early supporter of the foundation, she said, and she received about 20 disease-resistant nuts from the foundation 13 years ago. Regier said of those 20 nuts, 10 sprouted, nine survived and some already are 20 feet tall.


Regier said she collected 50 nuts from her small grove of trees last year and hopes to give the seedlings to her friends.

Ed Toth of Sunderland, a retired wildlife biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, was busy digging holes as he talked about how great it is to see volunteers working together to accomplish a project in short time.

"And not one Environmental Impact Statement," Toth joked.

Contact Susan Smallheer at susan.smallheer@rutlandherald.com.

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