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## Naturalists hope fledgling American chestnuts could help spark a return of the former majestic tree

Posted by [Russell Hubbard--Birmingham News](#) February 27, 2009 5:45 AM



NEWS STAFF/BERNARD TRONCALE

U.S. Forest Service biologist Allison Cochran is in charge of a test planting of American chestnut trees in the Bankhead National Forest. Scientists hope these doomed seedlings will teach how the trees cope in the wild.

DOUBLE SPRINGS -- They are deep in the Bankhead National Forest, way out on a dirt road, past a burned-out cabin that is now mostly collapsed chimney and porch.

They are in a meadow the size and shape of a tennis court -- a few of the sacrificial lambs. They were never intended to live, but by their death, show the way for others to live.

They are American chestnut trees and most will never get much past hip height on a good-sized middle linebacker, and haven't since the 1940s, after a fungus wiped them out.

The small stand of stunted saplings in the Bankhead that will never make it to adolescence is a test crop. It was planted so a new generation of scientists who have never seen a live American chestnut outside a nursery can learn how they adapt to insects, how they compete for sunlight with other trees -- in short, how they behave in the wild.

Today's scientists need to learn all that because wild, mature American chestnut trees began disappearing from U.S. forests when a fungus from a Chinese chestnut tree attacked its American cousin, wiping it out.

It was a genocide: The majestic 100-foot American chestnuts used to account for 25 percent of the forests in the eastern United States. They are now gone, except for a handful in remote forests that somehow escaped, lucky dinosaurs spared the fate of the rest of their kind.

But hope remains alive for the American chestnut, just as the spores of long-dead trees do to this day, active and alive underground even though the roots

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died decades ago. While the spores just grow into flimsy sprouts that never amount to anything, the American chestnut tree restoration project is alive and growing.

As Arbor Week comes to a close, there is a small but dedicated cadre of scientists and lay people working throughout Alabama on what they call the big dream: developing a new, blight-resistant American chestnut to repopulate the state's forests. Some look forward to the day when it will be possible for family backyards to have their own American chestnuts, full of chipping squirrels and heavy fruit that can be roasted over an open fire and eaten at Christmas, just as the song says.

"It is a bit of a romantic notion, isn't it?" said Larry Brasher, president of the Alabama chapter of the American Chestnut Tree Foundation. "There are people, aged now, who remember how magnificent they were, 70 feet up before you saw the first limb, just row after row of these massive, bare, columnar tree trunks."

At the Huntsville U.S. Forest Service station, research forester Stacy Clark is one of the many Alabamians working on the comeback. The doomed Bankhead chestnuts are hers, looked after day-to-day by U.S. forest rangers stationed in Double Springs.

The goal, Clark said, is to create a tree that is genetically 94 percent -- 15/16ths -- American chestnut, with the remainder Chinese. That should be just enough to retain the majesty of the American -- the tall trunks, white canopy and abundant fruit -- while protecting against the blight. Clark and her teams were the ones delegated the U.S. Forest Service to take the latest hybrids and see if they can make it into adulthood.

"If we pull it off, it will be one of the greatest successes in the history of natural resources," Clark said.

No one said it will be easy. The Chinese chestnut blight was an executioner. Orange-tinged cankers began appearing on American chestnuts in the early 1900s. The fungus spreads, eventually encircling entire trunks and branches with a pathogen. The tree dies.

The roots, strangely, are unaffected. New American chestnuts spring from these loins all the time in the wild, only to catch cancer in infancy and die. Most people passing by them in a pasture would think they were a twig stabbed in the ground, or a woody weed.


Clark thinks the backcrossed versions given to her for experimentation will make it this time. Last week, she oversaw planting of several dozen on Forest Service land in Tennessee, Virginia and North Carolina. They are, she said, the best hope that her generation of people will be able to buy an American chestnut in a nursery one day.

Back in the Bankhead, Forest Service wildlife biologist Allison Cochran looks after Clark's trees there. She is a practical woman, and knows her stand of 40 American chestnuts is doomed.

"These here were all planted at the same time, two years ago," she said, kneeling down to examine a patch with more dead sprouts than live ones. "They aren't going to make it, but they might help us replace some lost field knowledge so that another generation will."

### **American Chestnut Research**

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