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American chestnut ready to reign again

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March 16, 2009

BY MORGAN SIMMONS | SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

After decades of selective breeding and countless hours of fieldwork, researchers believe they have developed an American chestnut tree that is ready to reclaim the Appalachian forests.

The first batch of these blight-resistant chestnut seedlings arrived recently at a greenhouse on the agricultural campus of the University of Tennessee, where workers trimmed the roots and identified each tree with a numbered tag.

The trees -- 1,200 in all -- were planted in three Southern national forests as a groundbreaking experiment to determine if decades of crossbreeding have produced a chestnut tree that is blight-resistant yet retains the superior timber qualities of the American chestnut tree.

"This is the very first planting of the final generation and the culmination of a lot of hard work," said Scott Schlarbaum, forest geneticist with the UT Department of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries.

The trees were grown in a Georgia nursery in cooperation with the American Chestnut Foundation, an organization dedicated to restoring the American chestnut.

The American chestnut accounted for 25 percent of all the trees in the Appalachian mountains until a blight virtually eliminated them between 1904 and 1950.

Today, the airborne bark fungus still survives and kills virtually all American chestnuts by the time they've reached 20 feet in height.

For more than 30 years, the American Chestnut Foundation has been crossing Chinese chestnuts, which are naturally resistant to the blight, with American chestnuts to produce a super hybrid that can be reintroduced in the wild.

Of the 1,200-year-old chestnut seedlings brought to the UT greenhouse, 500 were the blight-resistant hybrids. The remaining trees were either pure American chestnut, pure Chinese chestnut or hybrid trees from an intermediate back-cross generation.

Earlier this year, the 4-foot-tall seedlings were planted on national forest lands throughout the Southern Appalachian region. In the coming years, researchers will regularly monitor the trees for blight resistance, mortality and growth characteristics.



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Stacy Clark, research forester for the Forest Service's Southern Research Station, said American chestnuts were renowned for their straight-grained wood and rapid growth rate.

"We want these trees to be blight-resistant, but also competitive," Clark said. "They're going out into the forest where they'll have to grow quickly to get above the deer browse, and compete with species like yellow poplar and red maple."

The goal of the American Chestnut Foundation was to breed a blight-resistant tree that is genetically 94 percent American chestnut. The foundation chose the Southern Appalachians as the proving ground for the final generation of seedlings because the region was once a stronghold for the American chestnut.

Clark, who leads the study for the U.S. Forest Service, said she is especially excited about two milestones in the trees' development: the fourth year of growth, which will reveal if the trees have held their own against competing species; and years 10 through 20, when American chestnuts normally succumb to the blight.

"If the trees are blight-resistant, we'll definitely know by that time," Clark said.

The chestnut blight robbed the Eastern forest of its undisputed champion. American chestnuts routinely grew 4 feet across and 120 feet high, and lived for centuries. The nuts were an important food source for a wide range of wildlife, and the rot-resistant wood was a prized building material.

Clark said that if the final generation of crossbred chestnuts survives in the national forests, this will raise great hopes about other species, like hemlocks and ash trees, that are being destroyed by nonnative pests.

"If we can restore this tree to its natural habitat, it will be the greatest success story in natural resource conservation," Clark said.

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