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Chestnut makes a comeback

Blight-resistant sapling planted at Philpott



Cathy Mayes (center), president of the Virginia chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, shovels dirt around a blight-resistant American chestnut tree sapling that was planted Wednesday at the Philpott Dam overlook. Looking on are (from left) Danny Martin of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, John Scrivani of the Virginia Department of Forestry, Susan Martin of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Robert Strasser, a biologist with the Virginia ACF. (Bulletin photos by Kim Barto)

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American chestnut by cross-breeding the trees with blight-resistant species and then using them to repopulate Appalachian forests. The national organization has invested \$17 million so far, said TACF president Bryan Burhans.

"If you think of all the ecological devastation in this country — we lost the buffalo, we lost the passenger pigeon — but this is one thing where we've stuck a flag in the ground and said, 'Not this tree,'" Burhans said during the ceremony.

"Your grandchildren someday may sit here at this spot, and the forest may look much different," he said. "That is a huge legacy to leave."

The loss of the American chestnut has been described as "one of the 10 worst environmental disasters to ever hit North America," said Park Ranger Danny Martin of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during the ceremony.

When the blight hit, it wiped out a quarter of the Appalachian hardwood population, according to TACF.

The blight was discovered in the United States in 1904, brought into the country from imported Chinese chestnut trees. The fungus entered American chestnuts through wounds in the bark and cut off the flow of nutrients from the roots to the rest of the tree.

By the 1930s, all of Virginia's chestnuts had been killed, said Cathy Mayes, president of the Virginia chapter of TACF.

Mayes noted that American chestnuts are not yet extinct, but "what we see today are little teeny-tiny understory trees."

Few trees survive long enough to reach tree size, she said, whereas "the tree our ancestors saw was absolutely enormous."

In its heyday, the American chestnut averaged up to 100 feet tall and five feet wide, and many trees were recorded at eight to 10 feet across, according to TACF.

"Chestnut was the main cash crop of this area for more than 100 years," Mayes said.

Records show Patrick County in 1910 produced 160,000 pounds of chestnuts that were shipped to the north for food, she said. People also depended on the tree for timber and food.

Ellen Jessee, chairman of the Martinsville-Henry County Rivers and Trails group and a member of Friends of Philpott, said her late father's farm in Franklin County used to be covered in American chestnut trees.

"They used it for their homes, their fences, their furniture," Jessee said. "They would let hogs run loose

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By KIM BARTO - Bulletin Staff Writer

Until a century ago, 4 billion American chestnut trees towered over Appalachian forests from Maine to Georgia.

But a deadly fungus known as the chestnut blight killed most of them in the early 1900s, experts said, destroying an important source of timber, food and income for people in the region.

On Wednesday, a group of scientists, foresters and officials gathered at the Philpott Lake Visitor Assistance Center and took a step to battle the blight. A blight-resistant chestnut, developed through 26 years of research by The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF), was planted near the overlook.

This is part of TACF's goal of restoring the American chestnut by cross-breeding the trees with blight-resistant species and then using them to repopulate Appalachian forests. The national organization has invested \$17 million so far, said TACF president Bryan Burhans.

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in the woods and forage for chestnuts, and it would fatten them up.”

Jessee said her father, who was born in 1911, used to tell stories about the trees before they were wiped out.

“He said the whole mountain that frames the farm would be white with blossoms. You can’t even imagine,” she said.

Now, the land still has chestnut sprouts coming up, but “they get to a certain age and die,” Jessee said.

To restore the tree to its former status as “king of the forest,” TACF is breeding advanced blight-resistant hybrids at its research farm in Meadowview.

The second phase of TACF’s plan is creating enough of these trees for reforestation, Mayes said.

“Hopefully, a few years from now, we’re going to start making entire forests out of these trees,” she said, but added, “That’s a huge challenge.”

Teresa Setliff, chemistry teacher at Bassett High School, brought a group of advanced placement chemistry and environmental science students to the ceremony Wednesday.

“This was a good lesson,” Setliff said. “Hopefully, they will take away an appreciation for the environment and a knowledge of what invasive species can do to native species.”

During the ceremony, students and other attendees lined up to toss handfuls of soil into a bucket that officials would use to plant the 2-foot-tall tree on the side of the hill below the Philpott Lake overlook.

Junior Tessa Law said the class gained an awareness of the American chestnut’s plight. Repopulating the tree will help the ecosystem, she said, because “when you lose one tree, you lose others through the domino effect.”

Senior Faith Collins said she was not familiar with the chestnut before, but added, “I learned a lot about it” on Wednesday.

“It’s part of our history. We need to keep it around,” she said.

Linda Drage, president of Friends of Philpott, also attended the tree-planting.

“This is great,” Drage said. “We’re going to be watching this tree routinely and hopefully get some more trees planted in the area.”

She added the organization hopes to do lectures in the community “to let more people be aware of it.”

State Sen. Roscoe Reynolds, D-Ridgeway, said, “I hope that the efforts of everyone involved with this will help return the chestnut to its glory days,” and it will be “something we can pass on to future generations.”

Del. Ward Armstrong, D-Collinsville, said that he has “always voted in favor of the chestnut” and noted “how important ... and instructive it is to repopulate it.”

Other speakers were Susan Martin and Daniel Brown of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The tree planted at Philpott joins ceremonial chestnuts that were planted at Monticello, Mount Vernon and the Smithsonian.