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News

Front Royal

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Resurrecting the chestnut

CRC project mixes strains to fight blight

By Ben Orcutt -- borcutt@nvdaily.com

FRONT ROYAL -- While dedicated to the preservation of endangered animal species, the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation and Research Center also is embarking on a partnership with the American Chestnut Foundation to preserve the American chestnut tree.

"The reason we're planting American is that in the cross-breeding program, we use one Chinese tree and four American trees to get a nut that has sufficient American ancestry that it'll survive in the woods, so we need a lot of American trees," said Hume resident Cathy Mayes, president of the Virginia chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation.

Mayes and other foundation volunteers joined with CRC staffers and students from George Mason University who are studying at the CRC this spring to help plant 250 chestnuts last week on a 2-acre tract along Racetrack Hill.

Asian blight devastated the once-common American chestnut in the 20th century, all but wiping it out in the Appalachian Mountains.

"The American trees don't have the blight resistance," she said. "The Chinese tree is an orchard-style tree and when it gets out in our woods, it competes with our oaks and our tulip poplars and it doesn't grow up. It doesn't naturalize. So what we're looking for is a tree that has the Chinese blight resistance, but the American morphology, so it grows and acts like an American tree."

The goal, with help from the GMU students and CRC staffers and volunteers, is for the 250 chestnuts that were planted on Tuesday to yield 250 chestnut trees, said Mayes, adding that the partnership between the CRC and the American Chestnut Foundation is a natural.

"We have obviously this interest in conservation of habitat for wildlife," Mayes said. "This place has deer protection, which is a fabulous place to put an orchard, particularly an American orchard."

"I couldn't be more excited. I think our missions are so complementary that I love working with



Tom Adkins, a Virginia master naturalist from Winchester, digs holes for chestnut seeds in this field at the Conservation Research Center in Front Royal last week. Rich Cooley/Daily



George Mason University students Brittany "B.C." Carter, left, 20, of Suffolk, and Jacob Knibb, 19, of Chesapeake, use bamboo poles to stake chestnut saplings. Rich

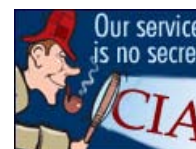


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them and I'm delighted to have them put chestnuts in their fields. You will see chestnut sprouts by the end of the growing season this fall. We should be able to harvest a lot of American chestnuts out of this orchard before they die.

"We're gonna have new combinations of genetic material in this orchard to use in the breeding program and make for stronger trees."

Bill McShea, a CRC wildlife biologist, also is excited about the partnership.

"I care about chestnuts because of the seeds they produce and how important those seeds used to be to wildlife," he said. "When we lost those seeds out of these forests, that was a big blow to wildlife in the Appalachians. Ninety percent of what we're doing is in Asia or in South America, and it's nice to have a conservation project that's right here in Virginia. [It's] some way we can contribute to the local conservation issues and not always be talking about rhinos or giant pandas or something like that. [American] chestnuts are in as much trouble as giant pandas and we can do as much work with American chestnuts as we can do with giant pandas."

GMU sophomore Joey Villari, 22, enjoyed being a part of Tuesday's planting.

"I like getting outside," Villari said. "A lot of our work has been inside the classroom so far, so it was nice to get out here and actually do something hands- on."

GMU junior Christi Kruse, 21, was like-minded.

"I think it's cool," she said. "I didn't know that there [were] any chestnuts left."

The chestnut orchard at the CRC is the fourth such orchard the American Chestnut Foundation has been involved in planting in Virginia, Mayes said.

Jack LaMonica, a volunteer with the American Chestnut Foundation, also was glad to lend a hand with Tuesday's planting at the CRC, and is pleased to partner with the CRC. LaMonica has a chestnut orchard on his farm about five miles south of Marshall.

"I am absolutely delighted," LaMonica said. "This is a mother tree orchard and until the CRC decided to do this, I was kind of doing it on my own. There are still a lot of chestnuts growing naturally, but their numbers are dwindling drastically because of developmental pressures and the disease."

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Cooley/Daily



Kylie Zirbel, 23, a teaching assistant with George Mason University, folds plastic UV tree tubes for the chestnut trees that were planted Tuesday at the Conservation Research Center in Front Royal on Tuesday. Rich Cooley/Daily



Sumama Serchan, a college intern, drops bamboo stakes off where chestnut trees are to be planted in this field at the Conservation Research Center in Front Royal on Tuesday. Rich Cooley/Daily

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