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News - Local / Metro  
Wednesday, Apr. 22, 2009

## Riverbanks adding rare chestnut trees to canopy

American chestnuts join rare species at Riverbanks

By JOEY HOLLEMAN - jholleman@thestate.com

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Two American chestnut trees will join the Amur tigers, Bali mynahs and other endangered species at Riverbanks Zoo and Garden on Earth Day.

Riverbanks, long known as a haven for endangered animal species, also houses rare plant species, such as the Rocky Shoals spider lily and the prairie sunflower. The American chestnuts join the zoo family today in a 10 a.m. ceremony along the tram road leading to the garden.

The trees are part of The American Chestnut Foundation's project to reintroduce a majestic species that once graced forests throughout the Eastern U.S. A blight brought in on Asiatic chestnuts around 1900 nearly wiped out the species in the next five decades.

### American chestnut

Two American chestnut trees will be planted at Riverbanks Zoo and Garden today in honor of Earth Day.

**What:** American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) is a large hardwood that was common in Eastern forests before being nearly wiped out by an Asiatic blight in the early 1900s.

**Current status:** Experts estimate there are fewer than 100 fully mature American chestnuts in its old range. Saplings still arise from old stumps, but they contract the blight long before they reach maturity. The current largest in South Carolina are about 35 feet tall, one on Paris Mountain and another at the Cliffs at Glassy development.

**Reintroduction:** The American Chestnut Foundation is leading efforts to produce a blight-resistant version. It hopes to begin planting blight-resistant trees in the wild by the end of this decade.

The two young trees to be planted today were propagated at the North Carolina Zoo from seeds from one of the few surviving giant American chestnuts in Adair County, Ky. The two trees were given to the S.C. Forestry Commission, which turned them over to Riverbanks.

"We want the garden to get a little more out there on things like this," said Andy Cabe, director of the botanical garden. "We trying to take a more active conservation role."

Eventually, signs will be placed along the tram route, telling the story of the American chestnut. But it might be a few years before the new trees reach "majestic" status, if they ever do. In the wild, stump sprouts pop up from old American chestnuts, but they often contract the blight and die before they reach 20 feet tall.

Scientists hope the trees grown from seeds of the healthy Kentucky giant have a genetic resistance to the blight, Cabe said. Even if the zoo trees eventually succumb to the disease, that will be another lesson learned in the effort to keep the species alive.

Reach Holleman at (803) 771-8366.



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