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Bringing back the American Chestnut tree could take a century

By Bob Downing
Akron Beacon Journal
Posted: 05/14/2009 05:13:56 PM PDT
Updated: 05/15/2009 11:17:28 PM PDT

AKRON, Ohio — American chestnut trees were once called the redwoods of the East, the kings of the forest.

Tall, stately and majestic, the woodland giants dominated forests from Maine to Alabama, stretching west into the Great Lakes region and Ohio Valley.

Many topped 100 feet in height and were up to 8 feet in diameter. They flowered in the spring, and the leaves turned golden in the fall.

They provided food to settlers and wildlife with their nuts. Their hardwood was widely used in cabins, barns, fences and furniture.

American chestnuts accounted for up to 20 percent of the trees growing in northern Ohio forests.

Then they were pushed to the brink of extinction.

The American chestnut was virtually wiped out in Ohio in the 1920s and 1930s, the victim of a fungus from Asia.

The blight from Asian chestnut trees was discovered in New York City in 1904. The orange-tinged cankers destroyed 3½ billion American chestnuts in the eastern United States in the decades that followed. By 1950, the giants were all but gone.

Now, there is hope that the American chestnut will make a comeback — although the process could take thousands of volunteers and perhaps a century to complete.

"It may be the biggest ecological restoration ever undertaken in the United States — and maybe in the world," said Bryan Burhans, chief executive of the American Chestnut Foundation, a grass-roots organization headquartered in North Carolina.

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With the help of volunteers across the country, his group is gradually changing the genetics, and results suggest there may be hope for the once-grand tree.

Among those aiding the effort is Brian McCarthy, a forest ecology professor at Ohio University.

"How often do you get to reintroduce a species that was all but lost?" he asked.

The national group is experimenting with ways to refine the American chestnut genetics. Its Ohio group is doing double duty: working to keep the all-Ohio American chestnut alive and, in cooperation with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, using the trees to reclaim acidic strip-mined lands in Ohio.

Creating the resistant tree is the challenge to

Burhans' 5,000-member American Chestnut Foundation.

When cross-pollinated with the squat Chinese chestnut, they can resist the blight. They are then repeatedly rebred with pollen from the pure and stately American chestnut, making each generation slightly more American. It is a time-consuming process, because the new tree must grow two to four years before it begins to flower, and nuts can be produced, harvested and planted again.

Each generation is inoculated with blight and screened for resistance, and only the most resistant trees are used in future crosses.

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