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Local News Story

N.C. American Chestnut Foundation Gets Help Reviving Chestnut Tree
Akron, Ohio, 05.04.2009
AP

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Forestry officials and volunteers in Ohio are working to revive the American chestnut tree, the woodland giants that once dominated forests across the eastern United States.

The effort is part of a larger one across the country to gradually change the chestnut's genetics, which volunteers hope will to make the tree more resistant to the Asian fungus that wiped out the trees in Ohio in the 1920s and 1930s.

"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 Asheville, N.C.-based American Chestnut Foundation.

American chestnuts that grew up to 120 feet once accounted for more than 20 percent of the forests in the eastern half of North America before the blight was discovered in New York City in 1904.

An estimated 3.5 billion American chestnuts were destroyed in the decades that followed. By 1950, few were left in the eastern United States.

Ohio Division of Forestry chief David Lytle is working with others to preserve the genetic stock of the region's native American chestnuts a necessity since trees from Ohio might not do well in, say, North Carolina or Tennessee.

Last year, a small state-run nursery was started in the Mohican-Memorial State Forest in Ashland County with the goal of producing and harvesting enough nuts to ensure that the Ohio trees' genetic material remains alive.

The American Chestnut Foundation's Ohio chapter is also working with the state's Department of Natural Resources to use the trees to reclaim acidic strip-mined lands in Ohio.

"How often do you get to reintroduce a species that was all but lost?" asked Ohio University forest ecology professor Brian McCarthy, who is among those aiding the effort to bring the trees back.

Another approach has been to cross-pollinate the American chestnut with the squat Chinese chestnut, which can resist the blight. The resulting trees are then repeatedly rebred with pollen from American chestnut trees, making each generation slightly more American.

Only the trees that are most resistant to the blight are used in the process, which is time-consuming because new trees must grow at least two years before flowering and producing nuts that can be replanted.

Trees that are 15/16 American chestnut and 1/16 Chinese chestnut are almost indistinguishable from the original, authorities said.

"All the different approaches are important because there's still a lot we don't know," said Greg Miller, a volunteer and nursery operator in Carroll County, east of Canton. "We have to keep our options open. I'm convinced that it's going to work, and there's a lot of scientific evidence that verifies that."

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