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## Planting to revive the chestnut



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About 250 American chestnut trees planted recently in Catoosa County, Ga., are part of attempts to re-establish the once-mighty chestnut as a part of American forests.

It's taken nearly 25 years to get to this point, and chestnut tree lovers still aren't quite ready to say they've found a tree variety that could withstand the blight that decimated the tree in the early 1900s.

"This backcross orchard has five families of backcross hybrids whose pedigrees include local American chestnuts from Northern Georgia and Eastern Tennessee," said Dr. J. Hill Craddock, a UTC biology professor who studies and breeds the American chestnut tree. "This is part of the program to breed American chestnuts for blight resistance and select for local adaptation."

It took a lot of work to get the trees ready for this step, he said.

The whole process was made possible by a land grant from the Tennessee Army National Guard, which opened several acres at the Volunteer Training Site in Tunnel Hill, Ga.

American Chestnut Foundation researchers are breeding native trees, the ones that survived the blight, with Chinese chestnuts. American chestnuts and Chinese chestnuts are slightly different, so researchers want the best of the Chinese variety — blight resistance — and the best of American varieties — large, majestic branches — all in one tree.

Just planting this massive field in Tunnel Hill isn't going to get the researchers to their goal. Dr. Craddock said that in about 10 years he'll introduce the blight fungus to the field, killing off the weakest of the trees. The ones that survive can be bred together and those seeds could be planted in a seed orchard, he said.

"We're growing hybrid American chestnuts, and the reason we go through all the trouble is that we want to conserve the local gene pool," Dr. Craddock said.

The National Guard planted two of its training sites with the chestnut trees, said Janie Becker, a conservation biologist for the Tennessee Army National Guard. The Tunnel Hill field and another near Jackson, Tenn., will be used in similar applications, she said. In all, about 700 trees were planted, she said.

The planting was funded through the Department of Defense Legacy Resource Management Program, she said. It's the military's effort, as one of the largest holders of land in the country, to preserve nature and heritage, she said.

"It's meant to be a big public relations thing, but it's also meant to make a difference," Ms. Beckler said. "The idea is that if we have all these public lands, we should be doing something good with them."

She said she believes this orchard is the first from the Chestnut Foundation in military lands.

"There are a lot of good conservation programs that the National Guard is a part of ... we want to do something good and important," she said.



Staff Photo by Angela Lewis SFC James Davis waters chestnut trees at the Volunteer Training Site-Catoosa.

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