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Bringing back the perfect tree

John Flavell

The Independent

Floyd Willis didn't count on performing shotgun weddings when he got into forestry.

Nothing in his education at East Carter High School, Ashland Community and Technical College, or the University of Kentucky taught him that one of the best ways to produce offspring would require a tank of helium, a pocket full of balloons, and a .20-gauge shotgun. And it was just never brought up in his training to be a forester with the Kentucky Division of Forestry.

"I never thought I'd be doing something like this," said Willis, holding up a newly bought helium tank. "And I guess you can get almost anything at Wal-Mart these days."

Thirty-five feet above Henderson Ridge in Elliott County, his targets were the female flowers of a surviving pure American chestnut tree. Once the royalty of the eastern forests — there were four billion of them — the tree's existence has for over a century been hanging on by a thread until a way is found to prevent its extinction.

So, Willis, 37, floated a helium balloon filled with chestnut pollen into the flowering canopy and blasted it apart with his shotgun. If the tree produces chestnuts in October, he'll know it worked.

It's the latest effort to bring back the American chestnut after a century-long failure to save it.

The American chestnut has been under attack for more than a century by a blight imported into the United States early in the 1900s from China. The attack was first noticed in 1904 when trees from the famed New York Botanical Gardens and Bronx Zoo began to die.

From there it took only 50 years for the blight to spread from mid-Maine to Georgia and as far West as the Ohio River Valley to kill the most populous tree in its range.

The Elliott County tree is just one of many survivors in northeastern Kentucky being used to help save the American chestnut, and Willis is only one of many people who scour private and public timber stands to find more.

Scott Freidof is the president of the Kentucky Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, which operates a research farm in Meadowview, Va. The ACF has been in existence for about 25 years and the farm's purpose is to breed surviving American chestnut trees with blight resistant trees from China, then back breed the offspring again to pure Americans. The goal is a 15/16th hybrid with the amazing characteristics of the 'perfect tree' which can survive the blight.

To find those rare American survivors, the foundation has reached out to state chapter members who have the will to sign on to a life-long endurance race with no expectations of ever seeing the finish line.

Friedof, 41, said the patience of the foundation's volunteers has paid off enough to send 15/16th Americans into the forests to see how they do.

"They're there," he said of the foundation's 15/16th tree. "This back-crossed tree is ready to go back into the forest and half of the nuts that were produced last year were distributed to longtime members of the organization, so it's a pretty big experiment. The numbers are small right now, but they've got the product to go back in the forest."

Earlier this year, Greenup County school children planted saplings as a school project, hundreds were spread out on abandoned mines in the Wayne National Forest, and a large plot was added to in Carter County's Tygart State Forest.

Since the American chestnut hasn't been seen in its glory for generations, it's difficult in modern times to comprehend its former prominence in the eastern forests.

A single mature tree could provide 6,000 chestnuts for wildlife and humans during hard winters. Southern Appalachian families used the nuts as legal tender to settle tabs at the general store. When shipped north and roasted, they provided a living for New York City street vendors.

The 'perfect tree' was rounded out by its characteristics. The grain was straight and easy to split, grew as fast as the poplars, and needed only the breeze to pollinate. The wood was light weight and nearly as rot resistant as the redwoods.

Contrary to popular belief, the tree isn't extinct. There are millions

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of the them growing in its range at any given time and that keeps it off the endangered species list. The post-blight difference is the life span of today's survivors. Before the 1900s, the chestnut could live well past a century. Now, it's rare to find one that will grow beyond 10 years.

Since the blight wiped out most of the stand, the tree has tried to regenerate itself. A protected root system sends sprouts through the forest floor to keep it alive long enough for someone like Willis or Freidof to find it and work with it. The work is two-fold. The first is to gather pollen for the trees at the research farm in Virginia. The other is to pollinate with other regional trees to keep local genetics alive.

Floyd Willis likes to focus on the latter. His day job as a forester helping landowners manage timber stands gives him the opportunity to look for chestnut survivors in at least four counties. He said landowners are surprised — then eager — to cooperate when they learn pure American chestnuts trees are surviving on their property.

Still, he added, it's a long-term proposition.

"If all these methods work," he said, "we'll never see it the way that it was 50 years ago. I guess after you do it a while you kind of understand there are some things you're not going to see. If you're a forester or a naturalist you have to think in those kind of terms."

The landowners don't seem to mind that. Willis said they know the survivors on their property will soon die, but they're still willing to give him access to work in what could be the last step to bring the tree back.

"They're on the cusp of something happening," he said. "They want to be able to look back and say they had a part in helping restore this tree and get it back."

John Flavell can be reached at jflavell@daillyindependent.com or (606) 326-2659. The Independent and Richmond Register are CNHI newspapers.



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