

Couple works to save ailing American chestnut tree



Randy Knight of The American Chestnut Foundation pollinates female burs Friday on one of the few remaining American chestnut trees on the Skitchewaug Trail in Springfield.

Benedict Hudson / Rutland Herald

By Susan Smallheer Staff Writer - Published: July 18, 2009

SPRINGFIELD — Dr. Randy Knight of Weathersfield usually spends his days in a hospital emergency room, tending to patients.

But early Friday morning, as the fog hung low in Spencer Hollow, Knight was busy tending to a different kind of patient: the ailing American chestnut tree.

Knight was meticulously pollinating the female flowers on two American chestnut trees growing by the side of Skitchewaug Trail, hoping to coax some chestnuts from the ailing trees before they succumbed to the chestnut blight, which has wiped out millions of trees in Vermont in the past 90 years.

High in a bucket truck from Davey Tree Service, Knight could reach the blossoms, which were close to the top of the 30-foot, three-trunk tree. He had placed paper bags over each promising female blossom on the tree about a week earlier and stripped off the dangling male catkins to keep them from being pollinated with another wild American chestnut or a Chinese chestnut.

With a small glass tube of pale-yellow pollen collected from The American Chestnut Foundation research farm in Virginia, Knight tapped out a tiny amount onto a small piece of glass hanging around his neck, breathed on the female blossom to moisten it and then trailed it through the pollen on the glass.

Then it was quickly covered by the small bag, which was tied back on. In September, he will be back to hopefully collect the chestnuts formed as a result of the pollination. The paper bag also thwarts squirrels.

The painstaking process is undertaken by volunteers who hope to breed a fungus-resistant American chestnut, which would have a small percentage of its genes from the fungus-resistant Chinese chestnut.

The Skitchewaug Trail nuts will be stored in a U.S. Forest Service refrigerator, packed in damp peat moss, and then be planted at the farm of Knight and his wife, Grace, who is the president of the Vermont/New Hampshire chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation.

It will take seven years before anyone knows whether Knight's pollination efforts on Friday morning will

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produce a blight-resistant tree, Grace Knight said. It takes that long for the nut to sprout and grow into a sapling big enough to be inoculated with the blight and see if it survives.

The Knights have already devoted a field of their Weathersfield farm to the chestnut restoration effort. Last spring they planted scores of nuts from other Vermont chestnut trees.

The society is watching four different American chestnut trees in the Spencer Hollow area of Springfield. And on Monday, it will pollinate an American chestnut in Washington, N.H.

But the pastoral hollow, once home to numerous Springfield dairy farms, historically produced chestnut trees, and longtime Springfield resident Don Whitney remembers his father telling of the county agent warning farmers to cut their chestnut trees in the 1920s, rather than see them die.

The blight was first identified at the Bronx Zoo in New York City in 1904, and made it up to Vermont by the 1920s. Chestnuts could be found mostly in the state's four southern counties, although there were and are exceptions.

His father cut his chestnuts and sold them to the Boston and Maine Railroad, he said, for railroad ties.

Among its many attributes, chestnut wood is very rot resistant, he said.

Central Vermont Public Service Corp. is a supporter of the effort, and the Vermont utility paid for the Davey Tree service truck.

"We're helping out with the bucket truck lift from a tree contractor," said Steve Costello, spokesman for CV. "It's part of our longtime efforts to promote sustainable forestry, in keeping with utility management."

"Our basic philosophy is that a well-managed forest is good for the environment and for our customers," he said, noting CVPS had won several awards for its forestry work.

Grace Knight said the trees that were pollinated Friday were probably sprouting from old rootstock.

The chestnut blight does not affect the chestnut roots, but it lives on a host oak tree – without hurting the oak, Grace Knight said.

The two clumps of trees along Skitchewaugh Trail were already showing signs of the fungus – reddish orange bumps down at the base of the tree, with an obvious wound and peeling bark. The trees will probably be dead in a couple of years, Grace Knight said.

Terry Gulick of Springfield found the trees during scouting expeditions on behalf of the chestnut foundation. He noticed the trees' distinctive leaf with its serrated edge, or the dangling white male catkins in July.

Gulick knows of other chestnut trees, scattered throughout the state. The mother of all chestnut trees in Vermont is in Berlin – at 80-foot tall.

The foundation has collected nuts from that tree, and a couple of healthy trees in Colchester.

"We know it's an American chestnut because it blooms on the Fourth of July," Grace Knight said. This year, the trees are a little behind schedule because of the cool and rainy summer, she said.

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