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Majestic chestnut's helpers

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Those old enough to remember when the American chestnut tree flourished in forests in the eastern United States have one word to describe it: majestic.

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The tree grew faster than oak, was decay-resistant and had edible nuts, giving the tree a variety of commercial uses, not to mention immortality in "The Christmas Song" ("Chestnuts roasting on an open fire.")

Meanwhile, it was those nuts, falling to the ground each fall, that were an important source of food for all kinds of wildlife from wild turkeys to deer and bears. How sad to think that nearly 4 billion chestnut trees were destroyed by a fungus called blight during the first half of the 20th century.

Enter the American Chestnut Foundation, Cornell Cooperative Extension and the state chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation.

These groups have been working together to help develop a blight-resistant strain of the American chestnut tree in hopes of reintroducing it throughout New York and, ultimately, its original range that ran from Maine to Georgia and as far west as the Ohio River Valley.

"Planting trees is our way to help gain attention for the American Chestnut Foundation's research," said Larry Becker, president of the turkey federation's New York chapter. "Everyone, especially wildlife, will benefit from reintroducing the chestnut to its original range."

The federation's Wyoming County Gobblers recently held a tree planting ceremony at Carlton Hill Wildlife Management Area in Wyoming County. The goal is to conduct plantings in each of the 53 New York counties that were once home to the American chestnut.

Since 2001, the turkey federation New York has donated \$10,500 from its Hunting Heritage Super Fund — money raised at banquets — to help chestnut tree research.

The seedlings planted at Carlton Hill (some grown at C&C Nursery in Churchville, which donates a portion of proceeds back to research) are a pure strain susceptible to blight. But the trees can grow to 30 feet, produce fruit for wildlife and give people a chance to recognize and study them before they die. That exposure is important to growing interest in the tree (identified by its narrow, tooth-edged leaves).

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John Curtiss, left, Larry Becker, Wally Urf, Butch Radall and Todd Kingdon planted American chestnut seedlings on Carlton Hill in Wyoming County. (Photo provided by MARSHA KINGDON)

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