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Chandis Klinger of Middleburg plants a chestnut tree sapling. Matthew Harris/The Daily Item /

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Published August 08, 2009 11:02 pm - A hundred years ago, an unwanted visitor arrived in Pennsylvania. A lethal fungus, known as the chestnut blight, it hitched a ride from Asia and landed in New York in 1904, moved into Pennsylvania by 1909, and within 40 years, it destroyed the American chestnut tree population.

## Paxtonville man works to revive American chestnuts

By **Wayne Laepple**  
The Daily Item

PAXTONVILLE — A hundred years ago, an unwanted visitor arrived in Pennsylvania. A lethal fungus, known as the chestnut blight, it hitched a ride from Asia and landed in New York in 1904, moved into Pennsylvania by 1909, and within 40 years, it destroyed the American chestnut tree population.

Today, after years of trying, there is hope that a blight-resistant strain may eventually restore the American chestnut tree to health, though it may never again reach the estimated four billion trees that once grew on 200 million acres from Maine to Georgia and west to the Ohio Valley.

Man plants seedling

A Paxtonville man, Chandis Klinger, who has been taking part in a program by the American Chestnut Foundation since 1983, last week planted a chestnut seedling on his land near the Middleburg American Legion post that may be among the first of the blight-resistant trees.

"We thought it would take 60 years to develop blight-resistant nuts, but we did it in 25 years," Klinger said. "This is a real milestone."

The American Chestnut Foundation operates a research facility in Meadowview, Va., where plant biologists and geneticists have been crossing American chestnuts with blight-resistant Chinese chestnuts. In order to maintain the significant characteristics of the American chestnut, the scientists have "back crossed" the trees several times, resulting in a tree with 15/16ths American chestnut genes and 1/16th Chinese genes.

1,000 nuts distributed

This year, the research farm had 1,000 nuts for distribution to interested members of the foundation, like Klinger, to plant and monitor. Each member was allotted five nuts, and Klinger planted his five in half-gallon juice cartons and kept them in his home until they were well sprouted. Two failed to germinate, and another seedling died after it began to grow, leaving him with two healthy seedlings.

Sara Fitzsimmons, a plant biologist with the foundation, came to Klinger's property to witness the planting of one of the seedlings last week. She was accompanied by Alex Day, president of the Pennsylvania chapter of the foundation.

"We have a memorandum of understanding the with U.S. Forest Service," she said. "We gave them 500 nuts to be planted in national forests in Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina."

She said the forest service provides some funding for chestnut research.

15-year outlook

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