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Home > News > News > Northwest Corner Journal

Northwest Corner Journal

Heritage Walk Will Describe Chestnut Restoration Effort

By: Kathryn Boughton 09/17/2009

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FALLS VILLAGE-The annual Heritage Walks sponsored each year by the Upper Housatonic Valley Heritage Area will be offered on two weekends this fall, Saturday and Sunday and Oct. 3 and 4. Among the many offerings this year will be a presentation Saturday morning at 10 a.m. by Ellery "Woods" Sinclair of the Connecticut Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation. He will explain attempts to regenerate the population of American chestnut trees following its virtual elimination due to blight.

"It will be a about an hour and a half presentation about the whys and wherefores of the loss of American chestnuts and attempts to bring them back," he said. "The American Chestnut Foundation has been involved in the process since about 1960."

Mr. Sinclair said there are about 300 trees planted in an orchard on Undermountain Road in Falls Village. The trees are "about 15/16ths American Chestnuts with 1/16th Chinese chestnut-the 1/16th carries the resistance to disease," he said.

Mr. Sinclair said there are some "pure" American Chestnuts in the region, including one on Mt. Riga. This spring, the flowers on the tree were bagged by members of the Chestnut Foundation assisted by students from the Housatonic Valley Regional ag science program and Bartlett Tree Service. "We bag the female flowers to protect them from any ambient pollen," he said. "Then when the male pollen is just right, we pollinate them and bag them again. In September, when the time is right, we nip them off and take out the chestnuts."

Expected mortality for the resulting trees is seven out of eight. But the remaining

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tree is presumed to be resistant to the blight and will be the basis for future cultivation. In about 20 years it is hoped there will be a population of trees that can be transplanted, providing trees that future generations can enjoy.

Mr. Sinclair said that historically American chestnuts accounted for one in five hardwood trees from Georgia to Maine, providing timber for building as well as food for animals and settlers. Its nuts provide "very nutritious food," he said.

Signs will be posted from both Routes 63 and 7. The rain date will be Sunday. Pre-registration is required: call 860-824-7454 or email WML61@comcast.net to reserve a space.

For information about other Heritage Walks go to www.heritage-hikes.org.

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