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# Maine Outdoors

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## Groups promote American chestnut growth

By [Rich Hewitt](#), BDN Staff

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Fern Stearns, a member of the Narramissic Friends meeting, waters a newly planted American chestnut seedling, while Dave Davis and Ginny Davis, also Friends members, look on. The planting was done on land owned by the Great Pond Mountain Conservation Trust in Orland in conjunction with The American Chestnut Foundation which provided the seedlings. It is part of a national effort to restore the American chestnut which was ravaged by blight more than a century ago. [Buy Photo](#)



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A batch of American chestnut seedlings ready to be planted. [Buy Photo](#)

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A wire mesh fence is placed around an already planted seedling to protect it from animals. The planting, in conjunction with The American Chestnut Foundation, is part of an effort to restore the American chestnut which was ravaged by blight more than a century ago. [Buy Photo](#)



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Glen Rea, the Maine and national chairman of The American Chestnut Foundation, points out the large tap root on a seedling that was planted Thursday by the Narramissic Friends Meeting and the Great Pond Mountain Conservation Trust on trust lands in Orland. The planting, in conjunction with the foundation, is part of an effort to restore the American chestnut which was ravaged by blight more than a century ago. Listening are (from left) Ginny Davis, forester Roger Greene (partly obscured) Fern Stearns and Dave Davis. [Buy Photo](#)

ORLAND, Maine — The American chestnut was once among the most highly prized trees in the eastern forests and was considered the perfect tree for its quick growth, its use as timber and for the chestnuts it produced. That was before 1904, when a blight struck the trees. Discovered first in New York, the blight, an Asian fungus, spread quickly throughout the natural range of the tree, including Maine, which is at the northern edge of that range. The blight spread quickly, and by 1950, it had destroyed an estimated 4 billion trees.

On Thursday, two local groups in Orland joined a national effort to restore the American Chestnut by planting 24 seedlings. Members of the Narramissic Valley Friends Meeting and the Great Pond Mountain Conservation Trust planted seedlings provided by the Maine Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation along an old tote road on trust land. The planting could be the start of a wider project to include the chestnut trees as part of a mixed hardwood stand on trust lands.

The local effort began at a Friends meeting, according to member Fern Stearns after the group viewed a movie about tree planting.

“Like most religions — and most people — we believe that one of our responsibilities is to be good stewards of our natural resources,” Stearns said. “We discussed maybe planting some trees, and figured that would be even better than watching a movie about it.”

Stearns knew Glen Rea, who serves as chairman of the local chapter of the foundation as well as its national chairman, and approached him about obtaining trees. She also contacted the Great Pond Trust, which owns approximately 4,300 acres of land in East Orland it manages for wildlife and recreation and as a sustainable, working forest.

“We’re always looking for an opportunity to try to get something going,” said Trust member Geo Atwood. “We have an interest in any conservation project in this area of Hancock County.”

Meanwhile, The American Chestnut Foundation, or TACF, has been working since it was formed in 1983 in an effort to re-establish the tree in its historic range, which ran from Georgia to Maine and west to the Ohio River Valley. The foundation uses native trees but also has developed a backcross breeding program, breeding American

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around the country, in conjunction with the National Forest Service and through local forestry projects.

In fact, the Maine Chapter of TACF has donated two of the highly resistant American chestnut trees to the city of Bangor and will plant them at 3 p.m. Friday afternoon in Bangor City Forest.

According to Rea, the trees planted on the Trust land are not the highly resistant varieties. The seedlings came from native Maine trees, he said.

“We’ve found about 250 native trees that escaped the blight,” he said. “We use the seeds from those trees.”

They were pollinated with pollen from trees growing in Virginia at the foundation’s research farm.

Rea started the seedlings indoors at his home in Orono and then set them outdoors to let them “harden.” The planting in Orland was delayed because of the wet weather. Last month, volunteers from the Trust and the Friends group, along with a group of students from KidsPeace in Ellsworth, prepared the site, which included clearing brush off the old tote road and digging the 24 holes for the seedlings.

This is not the first effort to grow American chestnuts on the Trust’s lands. Trust forester Roger Greene said at least one other planting was done last year, but it appears that most, if not all of them, did not survive.

“The deer got them,” he said. “The deer think of chestnuts like ice cream. They’ll chew them right to the ground.”

To protect these new seedlings from the deer and other critters, the Friends and the Trust have set up wire mesh fences around each plant.

Greene said they chose the tote road site because it has the features that chestnut trees like: a light, sandy loam soil that is well-drained; east or northeast facing slopes; and plenty of light.

Although Maine is the northern-most limit of the American chestnut’s range, Rea said the Orland site is ideal because it is surrounded by existing oak and beech trees, both near relatives of the chestnut. The American chestnut is a fast growing tree, and if it survives the first winter, it can put on several feet of growth in subsequent years. A healthy tree will start putting out seeds when it is about 7 years old.

If the Orland trees survive, Rea said the site would be a good candidate to receive some of the highly resistant varieties in the future. TACF is looking to develop other sites around the state, he said. In addition to its work with the National Forest Service, which plants and monitors chestnut trees around the country, the foundation has worked closely with the University of Maine School of Forestry.

“They have been very helpful to us and have given us five acres to plant trees,” he said.

The foundation also is working with Penobscot County Conservation Association to plant another five acres of trees in Stetson. The national TACF has a goal of developing 7,000, one-acre plots planted with American chestnuts, and the Maine chapter hopes to create 70, one-acre plots around the state.

Stearns is somewhat cautious about planning too far ahead.

“These are 100 percent American chestnut trees,” she said. “Our goal is to see if the American chestnut can survive here. If they do, then we’ll try to get some blight-resistant ones.”

Greene takes a little longer view and said he envisions this planting as the first of several, which could establish the American chestnut as a thriving part of the Trust’s wildlands property. There are other tote roads running parallel to the current planting site that provide similar growing conditions. He foresees the chestnut trees becoming a part of a 40- or 50-acre mixed hardwood stand.

“This is a far-thinking thing,” he said. “This is a legacy project.”

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