

Tree planting near Asheville part of hope for American chestnut

ASHEVILLE — On one of their routine dog walking trips through the North Carolina Arboretum on Tuesday afternoon, Claire and Jim Waller bumped into a tree-planting ceremony with karmic overtures.

It was a ceremonial planting of a blight-resistant American chestnut tree in the Arboretum's Canopy Garden in what chestnut enthusiasts hope is the return of the once grand and majestic trees to the Southern Appalachians.

"We were in New Orleans years ago and saw this beautiful hutch. It was gorgeous. It was made of chestnut," Claire Waller said, adding that the couple had just bought a book at the parkway visitor center on the American chestnut.

"Ever since then, we've been enamored of chestnut. It's such a wonderful wood, and it's just a shame about what's happened to the chestnut."

What happened was an epic blight in the first half of the 20th century that decimated the chestnut population.

"It was once one of the most prominent trees. It constituted one in four trees in the

Eastern forests," said Paul Franklin, of the American Chestnut Foundation.

"It was known as 'the mighty giant,' typically growing up to 100 feet tall in the forests, with trunks about 15 feet in diameter. It was a very tall, very fast-growing tree and produced a tremendous amount of food."

The chestnuts could produce about 1,500 pounds of seeds a year, compared with 500 pounds from the oaks, Franklin said. This was an important food source for turkey, deer and bear, as well as for people who would sell them and let their hogs run loose to feed and fatten up on the nuts. The lumber was also an important source of building materials.

"It was an integral part of the food and economic cycle in the region," he said. "Four billion trees died in the blight."

A blight imported from Asia hit American chestnuts in 1904. By 1950, the blight had killed virtually all the mature trees from

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Maine to Georgia and west to Ohio.

But the American public wouldn't let go of the dream of the chestnut, said Bryan Burhans, American Chestnut Foundation president and CEO.

"It's not been that long. It's still in the minds of many people today who were alive during the blight," Burhans said. "It's a charismatic mega flora, much like the mega fauna such as pandas and grizzlies, the chestnut is an iconic tree."

In 1983, a group of scientists formed The American Chestnut Foundation, with the simple mission of restoring the American chestnut tree to the eastern woodlands to benefit our environment, wildlife and society. They began a special breeding process, which in 2005 produced the first potentially blight-resistant trees, called Restoration Chestnuts.

Now, the Asheville-based nonprofit is planting these trees in more than 300 locations throughout the Eastern United States, including the Arboretum. The Tuesday planting is part of a final phase of testing. Now 1-year old and a couple of feet tall, the two chestnut trees in the Arboretum will be carefully monitored as they mature.

"The health and biodiversity of our forests is so important to the health of our community," said Burhans.

Burhans said he hopes the genetically engineered chestnut in the Arboretum will

help inspire locals to see the potential.

"It's fantastic. It gives anyone who wants to see a chestnut the opportunity to see one," said Tony Morrison, the Arboretum's natural landscape crew leader and arborist. "It's exciting to have them here, considering their importance to wildlife and ecology."

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