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# Brooklyn man fights for chestnut return, tree decimated by disease in early 20th Century

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Thursday, March 24th 2011, 4:00 AM

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Marino for News

Bart Chezar is working to return chestnut trees to Prospect Park. These are — hopefully — resistant to a fungus that has decimated the species and the ecosystems they supported across the U.S.

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Bart Chezar speaks for the trees - the virtually extinct American chestnut tree, to be specific.

The Park Slope resident is making Brooklyn fertile ground for the comeback of the once plentiful plant, which was decimated by disease in the early 20th century.

Thanks to Chezar's dedication, Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden will be among the first places in the state to get a new and - chestnut fans hope - blight-resistant strain of the tree.

"These are things that were important to the environment, and I saw the possibility of them being restored," said Chezar, 64, a volunteer who, since 2004, has been nurturing eight American chestnut trees in Prospect Park that will eventually succumb to the illness.

Today, the American Chestnut Foundation will officially hand off 10 of its new hybrid seeds to the city's Parks Department. The plants have been specially bred to fight off a fungus that since around 1900 has been killing the trees before they're mature enough to flower or grow chestnuts.

The seeds will be sprouted at Staten Island's Greenbelt Native Plant Center and then planted in the park and garden next year.

"Maybe I'm a sentimentalist," said Chezar, who also led an effort to restore oysters to New York Harbor. "But if we can bring back some of these species, it's a hopeful symbol for the environment and civilization."

In the late 1800s, American chestnut trees were a major food and lumber source, covering a 200-million-acre swath of the eastern United States that included the five boroughs.

"An entire ecosystem was lost when the chestnut tree disappeared," said foundation spokeswoman Meghan Jordan. "It's not just bringing back a tree, it's also trying to bring back healthy forests."

For almost 30 years, the group has working on a hybrid by cross-breeding an American tree with a Chinese one that's immune to the disease.

Chezar, a retired alternative energy researcher at the New York Power Authority, discovered the tree's plight eight years ago and lobbied to get some for Prospect Park.

When he heard about the hybrids, he pushed for Brooklyn to get those, too, snagging three of the 10 seeds through his \$500 foundation membership.

Chezar plans to keep a close eye on the newcomers, and he's hopeful they'll thrive, he said. "If we're good caretakers, the environment is pretty resilient."