

# Tree-huggers work diligently to save chestnut

**A**s a tree-hugging deer-slayer, I was thrilled to hear from MassWildlife's Bill Davis about a truly historic moment in Massachusetts natural history:



Mark  
**BLAZIS**

Outdoors

the June 15 planting of "functionally extinct" American chestnut seedlings back into the wild.

I never believed I'd see the return of our lost "Sequoias of the East" in my lifetime. The once-common, 6-foot wide, 100-foot tall giants of our forests appeared destined to be just New England memories in an 1840s Longfellow poem about a village smithy or in a Johnny Mathis Christmas song, nostalgically savoring delicious nuts roasting on an open fire.

The restorative planting of this magnificent, long-lost, true American is the culmination of a war-like effort brilliantly fought by tireless botanists and geneticists. Every hunter who has ever used the term "tree huggers" disparagingly should tip his hat to these heroes. Their efforts likely will inestimably improve the lives of wildlife, sportsmen, and naturalists.

Around 1904, thanks to international trade bringing us the

good, the bad and the ugly from all over the world, chestnut blight was introduced to New York City, having accompanied imported Chinese chestnut trees, which have a genetic resistance to the disease. Tragically, their American cousins had no resistance. Previously, billions of American chestnuts dominated our eastern forests with their grandeur and valuable wood and nuts, which provided sustenance for deer, bears, wild turkey and American Indians.

Within 50 years, wind-blown spores had spread the disease from New England to Georgia, decimating all mature trees and leaving only scrubby shoots emerging from the bases of dead trunks. The loss of this largely forgotten American icon changed the character of our eastern forest and economically affected thousands. I don't know anyone who has seen a magnificent, full-grown American chestnut. Sadly, most Americans are too young or unread to know what a national treasure we're missing.

Desperate botanists, seeing the chestnut's deplorable extinction, tried to develop a resistant form of the tree but were unsuccessful. Government funding for those efforts ceased in 1960. Bleak was the fight against the blight.

Thankfully, American tree-huggers didn't give up and some

formed the American Chestnut Foundation. Using a technique that had successfully developed disease-resistant grain crops, they devised a new strategy to bring back the American chestnut.

It's been a long haul since 1983, when the war against the blight resumed. The ACF basically took disease-resistant, Chinese chestnut cousins — a relatively dwarf species that grows only half as tall — and crossed them with American chestnut sprouts that emerge from dead trunks. Fortunately, they were unaffected by the disease, and their roots continue to regenerate skinny, short chestnut saplings that generally survive only about six years, just long enough to briefly flower and afford us the opportunity to use their pollen. Breeding those hybrids back to American chestnuts time after time has resulted in a nearly pure, 15/16th's American chestnut.

Growing under most observers' radar, 300 of these American chestnut seedlings have been carefully nurtured at a special orchard at the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's Central District office in West Boylston, along with others at Tower Hill Botanic Garden in Boylston and at Moore State Park in Paxton. All the while, work has continued on genetics at the American Chestnut Foundation's research

quarters. Twenty-eight years of painstaking efforts have resulted in the miraculous planting of five precious seedlings at the Westboro Wildlife Management Area.

Additional plantings of these botanical treasures at other select sites will hopefully form a reproductive core for our future forests' regeneration. We won't know for at least another 10 years whether these efforts have totally succeeded.

Some of us may not see the day — but I hope our children do — when impressive groves of nut-laden American chestnut trees — standing proud like true Americans — once again sustain healthy populations of deer, bear, turkeys and other wildlife, and make our country even more majestic. They could reforest entire stretches of strip-mined Appalachia, where they once prevailed.

In the meantime, deepest thanks to all the great local tree-hugger heroes, especially Ruffin Von Bossuyt, Curt Laffin, Bruce Spencer, Denis Melican, Jim Coull, Wayne MacCallum, Bill Davis and those at MassWildlife and National Grid, who confronted repeated failure and worked — despite knowing their efforts might not blossom in their lifetime — to help make that glorious day possible for every sportsman and naturalist in America.

6/21/11 Worcester (MA) Telegram  
(In the sports section)