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Sunday, May 11, 2008

Farm hosts planting with hope that chestnut trees can return to area

Dan Bustard

Staff Reporter

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WEATHERSFIELD - With his yellow measuring tape suspenders and a can of bug spray in his shirt pocket, Randy Knight had the look of someone spending a sunny spring day out on the farm.

He wasn't alone in his labors on this Saturday, and the return of a tree wiped out by blight 100 or so years ago is the beneficiary.

On Knight's High Shelter Farm off Gravelin Road in Weathersfield, with a healthy view of nearby Mt. Ascutney in the background, between 20 and 30 people planted 238 chestnuts with the hopes an orchard of American Chestnut trees will eventually take hold.

His family joined the American Chestnut Foundation several years ago.

"I had no idea I would be planting a chestnut orchard. It's a tree we need to bring back," said Knight, not just for the tasty chestnuts birds, deer, raccoons, bears and other animals (including humans) can eat but to draw insects that birds also feed on.

That sentiment was shared among all getting their hands dirty, matching the right chestnuts to the right colored flags to help monitor their progression, mixing with another breed of chestnut that caused

Also in today's Eagle Times

Springfield to settle Park Street question Tuesday

SPRINGFIELD - After years of debate, Springfield residents will chart the future course this week on where their elementary students will be educated.

Voters head to the polls Tuesday

NEWPORT - Newport voters head to the polls Tuesday for the first time under SB2 rules and will have the opportunity to vote to return to the annual town meeting format as well as decide how much taxes will be reduced.

Meadow Road Senior Housing has a touch of green

its near extinction in order to create a more resistant tree.

American Chestnuts were devastated by a blight accidentally introduced on imported Chinese chestnut nursery stock brought to the country in the 1890s. This fungal blight killed nearly all of the four billion chestnuts growing wild in Eastern forests by the 1940s. It is said you can tell the age of a home built with American Chestnut wood, about 100 years given how quickly the blight ravaged this particular tree.

Leila Pinchot, the outgoing New England science coordinator for the foundation, said perhaps as few as four trees will prove to be blight resistant. While 200 more chestnuts will be planted here next year, Pinchot said in about six to seven years it will be known which trees are making the grade and which will be culled.

"These regional orchards are essential to getting these trees back," she said, particular on land facing east toward New Hampshire along with blending the Chinese Chestnut's blight resistant ability. "This is the way to do it."

Ten years ago, every county forester in Vermont considered this tree extinct.

The American Chestnut Foundation had other ideas, starting an effort to find any surviving wild trees. Eight large wild trees were found in Vermont, and the nuts planted on Saturday came from two trees, one in Thetford and another in Colchester after being cross pollinated at a foundation test farm in Virginia.

The nuts produced by the trees were enjoyed by many animals along with Native Americans in the days before Europeans came to this continent, said Mark Grable of Springfield, who plans to plant American Chestnuts along with boat building woods like White Oak, Yellow Birch and North White Cedar on 12 acres he owns in Chester.

"I'd like to think I can actually do something for kids of the future" who will face many problems, Grable said. "Maybe they'd like a few benefits."

The nuts are tasty for people as well as animals, but Saturday was not the day for taking a bite.

"They are so coveted," said Kendra Gurney, Pinchot's replacement as regional science coordinator, about the nuts. "But we don't want to eat them. We want to plant them."

Part of the family with oak and beech trees but not related to horse chestnut trees, the American Chestnut were once relatively easy to find in the Connecticut River and Lake Champlain Valleys. With the Connecticut River dividing the two states, a joint chapter in the foundation. Knight and his wife Grace are co-vice presidents.

The first Vermont test orchard has been planted at Shelburne Farms. New Hampshire's first test orchard will be planted on May 15 in the Shieling State Forest in Peterborough.

NEWPORT - The Meadow Road Senior Housing development will be smoke-free when it opens this fall.

Program empowering women turns 10 years/b>

BELLOWS FALLS - Working for Southeastern Vermont Community Action, Nancy Clingan did not like what she was seeing.

Clarke named Chamber's 'Citizen of the Year'

CLAREMONT - The Greater Claremont Chamber of Commerce has selected longtime Claremont resident Don Clarke as it's 2008 "Citizen of the Year."

For the full story see the print edition of the *Eagle Times*

Knight, who works at Valley Regional Hospital in Claremont, said he has training in health care science and is interested in science projects.

"This is a way to mix some interests of mine and do some good for the forests in the area," he said. "I'm in a position to do this."

For more information, go to the American Chestnut Foundation's Web site at www.acf.org. There is a link to the Vermont-New Hampshire chapter on the site.

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