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LOCAL

FALLS VILLAGE: Breeders hope for American chestnut tree revival

Wednesday, May 30, 2007

BY BRIGITTE RUTHMAN

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FALLS VILLAGE -- In something like a patient search for a needle in the forest, chestnut tree breeders were in the Northwest Corner Tuesday, aiming to return chestnut trees to their natural habitat.

The odds are against them.

Most of the 118 chestnuts planted seven feet apart in a field of a little more than an acre at Great Mountain Forest in Falls Village Tuesday will sprout and leaf out into trees this year.

At best, one out of eight will become saplings. Maybe, just maybe, a handful will survive drought, foraging animals, and the deadly chestnut blight to flower and produce nuts in seven or eight years. The hope is that some of the resulting offspring will produce just the right combination of genes to create a more virulent fourth-generation tree -- a tree able to withstand the deadly chestnut blight that killed 4 billion trees in the first half of the 20th century.

American Chestnut Foundation representative and Yale Forestry student Leila Pinchot delivered the nuts, which have been stored in her refrigerator in Tolland. A small green protective tent was placed over each of the hybrid nuts which have already been bred for disease resistance for three generations, crossing the unique characteristics of the American chestnut with the disease resistant Asian strains.

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The trick is to bring back as much of the unique and desirable American characteristics as possible.

"We want a chestnut that looks and acts American, but is resistant to the blight," said Pinchot, whose great-grandfather Gifford started the U.S. Forest Service.

At one time, 25 percent of American forests were chestnuts. They provided a food source for wildlife and a reliable annual food crop. Fast growing and hardy, they produced a durable hardwood favored as timber framing and flooring. As resistant to rot as cedar, they can still be found as fence posts poking out from overgrown pastures, barbed wire still stapled to them.

The blight, a fungal infection, was introduced to the United States in a shipment of Asian chestnut trees intended as specimen trees on large estates which arrived around 1900.

Tuesday's effort was the collaborative work of the Connecticut Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, and Great Mountain Forest, a demonstration research forest. Two other similar efforts have already been launched in the Northwest Corner -- one at the White Memorial Foundation and another Topsmead State Park, both in Litchfield

This isn't the first attempt at returning the chestnut to Falls Village.

The U.S. Forest Service, Yale University and Great Mountain joined forces in 1947 to plant chestnuts thought to be disease resistant in 1947. They were planted in Robbins Pitch, close by the new orchard. The effort failed, though no one is sure why. A few sprigs of chestnut can still be found, forester Jody Bronson said, but no nuts litter the forest floor in the fall.

Elsewhere in the forest is a random chestnut that has survived infection long enough to produce nuts without scientific help, one of just a handful identified across the state. It's natural defenses will likely succumb along with most of the trees that will grow from the nuts planted Tuesday, though an attempt will be made to cross breed it against the Asian hybrids.

"We are almost there," Pinchot said.

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