Chestnuts returning to Poplar Forest

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A tree species that has battled nearly a century of disease once thrived among the vegetation at Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest.

The trees are getting a chance to thrive again.

Poplar Forest staff and the Virginia Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation are planting three chestnut trees — one seed and two saplings — Sunday. It’s an opportunity for the retreat to restore trees that were once part of the natural landscape, said Jack Gary, archaeology and landscape director.

“Chestnuts, in Jefferson’s time, were everywhere,” Gary said. “A lot of folks today have never seen a chestnut tree.”

Gary said this is the first time landscape restoration of trees has taken place at the retreat, which is seeking volunteers to become involved in the efforts.

“It would be nice to get a presence here in the Lynchburg and Bedford area,” Gary said.

Chestnuts were used in the construction of the retreat house, President Lynn Beebe said.

The trees were virtually wiped out during the first half of the 20th century by disease from Asian imports, according to the American Chestnut Foundation’s Web site. This is the 25th year the nonprofit foundation, with 6,000 members in 17 states, has taken part in restoring the tree to its former glory.

Kathy Marmet, vice president for the Virginia Chapter of the foundation, said chestnut trees were an important resource in the Appalachian Mountains.

The trees’ nuts were used for food production, its bark for leather tanning, and timber for construction.
“This was a tree that people used for all sorts of things,” Marmet said. “From what I’ve read, it probably led to a lot of people moving to cities because they couldn’t live without it.”

The Virginia Chapter was given status two years ago and recently conducted the spring’s first planting near a church in Loudoun County, Marmet said. She said its goal is to get more people trained to recognize American chestnuts.

The trees that will be planted at Poplar Forest this weekend are called a “backcross,” Marmet said. It is a predominantly American tree with some Chinese breeding.

“They might not be as fully 100 percent American as we hope it would be,” Marmet said. “There’s a good chance they’ll grow up to be good standing trees.”

Chinese trees have a stronger resistance to blight disease that struck American trees in the early 1900s. The foundation is in its sixth generation of testing chestnuts to further that resistance, she said.

“Our goal is really a big one of re-establishing the species,” Marmet said. “We want a tree that can repopulate the forest. … It takes a lot of genetic diversity.”

Historically, chestnuts grew to 100 feet, she said, but today it is rare for one to grow past 70 feet.

Marmet will give a speech Sunday at the retreat before the planting entitled “Returning a Giant to our Forests.” Jay Mills, who sits on the foundation’s board of directors, will also take part in the ceremony.

The event is part of Thomas Jefferson’s birthday on Sunday.

Ceremonial planting at Poplar Forest:
- When: 12:30 p.m. Sunday
- Free and open to the public
- Also, the Léya String Quartet is giving a chamber music concert (ticket purchase required). Birthday cake will be served.
- Call (434) 525-1806 or visit [http://www.poplarforest.org](http://www.poplarforest.org) for more information