American chestnut trees added to Sewickley Heights park
by Joanne Barron
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Sewickley Heights Borough Park made history last month. The park hosted the first municipal American chestnut tree planting with 300 potentially blight-resistant trees planted on three acres of land through the Sewickley Restoration Branch.

The trees, provided by the American Chestnut Foundation, are the product of 30 years of crossbreeding and backcrossing with the most blight-resistant trees. The ones planted in the park are the most advanced trees. Another 200 earlier crosses are being added as controls.

Two other such orchards have been planted in Pennsylvania, but this progeny test is the first to be adopted by a municipality where the community will participate, including garden clubs, horticulturalists, Quaker Valley and Sewickley Academy high school students and other volunteers.

"They are the best trees we have to date," said Thad Jones, park ranger for Sewickley Heights Borough Park.

Although Jones said it will take about 150 years to restore the tree completely, the plantings are a step in the right direction toward restoring the American chestnut wiped out by blight and virtually was eliminated as a viable component of eastern forests.

The blight was inadvertently introduced on Asian chestnut species, in the late 1800s. It was first documented at the Bronx Zoo in New York in 1904. All initial efforts to save the chestnut trees failed.

In 1983 scientists began another attempt. The American Chestnut Foundation embarked on a breeding program that, it was hoped, would result in a blight-resistant species. For nearly 30 years, the foundation has been making steady progress toward that goal.

Finally, after nearly a century of efforts, the American chestnut is poised to reclaim its place in the forest. Sixth-generation "back-crossed" trees are becoming available, allowing the long-hoped for restoration to begin.

"The American chestnut was the dominant tree species in the eastern United States, anchoring an entire ecology, from Maine to Georgia, and west to the border of the Great Prairie. It often accounted for one in every four deciduous trees," Jones said.

"The American chestnut was the keystone species of the Keystone State, a veritable charismatic mega flora. It has become perhaps the most significant symbol of forest conservation in North America."

Jones said the restoration of the tree is a daunting effort that ultimately will span many generations.

"It requires us to look beyond ourselves and challenges us to leave a better, more viable forest to those who will succeed us," he said.

Because the park was able to secure several grants to prepare and clear the land for the plantings — two from the Garden Club of Allegheny County and another from the Sewickley Civic Garden Club — the American Chestnut Foundation offered to provide the trees at no cost.

Little Garden Club also has supported the project.

Each student who helps with the project will get the opportunity to adopt trees to plant, care for and watch grow, and Jones said, hopefully after they graduate, the next class of students will take over.

"Community participation is crucial to the success of this endeavor. Maybe someday their own kids will come to the park and see the trees," he said.

With all the volunteers helping in the area and the education activities, Jones is hoping awareness of the trees' plight will spread.

"I'm hoping one day it will be difficult to be from the Sewickley Valley and not have heard the story of the American chestnut."

Before the large planting at the park, Sewickley Academy students performed some maintenance at their own American chestnut orchard at Nichols Field as part of the school's Students in Action Day of Service.

Teacher Tracey Waznegger accompanied some of her environmental science class students to then field, where they had planted 10 American and 10 Chinese chestnut trees last year as a way to preserve local genes.

Students spruced up the orchard and did some testing to make sure the PH levels were right for the trees, said Jones, who initiated the project and helped the students plant the trees they originally had grown from seeds.

Jones said it is hoped the trees will be able to grow large enough to produce seeds within about five years before they are killed from the blight. Any seeds produced potentially could be used to continue the breeding process.

Jones, said the orchard at Nichols Field will serve as an educational tool for the students who gain first-hand experience in growing, planting and caring for the trees and collecting data.

For more information, visit the American Chestnut Foundation website at www.acf.org or call Jones at 412-496-8846.
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