Students help plant American chestnuts

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On a crisp, blustery Friday afternoon, students at Bruce Drysdale Elementary gathered for a ceremonial planting of what they're hoping are two blight-resistant American chestnut trees, along with more than two dozen other trees that are part of a larger project to plant native and edible tree species on school grounds.

As fourth-graders helped plant the first chestnut tree, younger students cheered them on, shouting in unison, “Grow, grow, grow!” The students were aided by parent volunteers and representatives of the Hendersonville Tree Board and The American Chestnut Foundation, which has an office in Asheville.

In addition to having chestnut trees on school grounds, science teachers will be able to use educational resources developed by TACF to supplement learning about American chestnut restoration efforts. Once a common species found in eastern forests a little over a century ago, American chestnuts stood up to 100 feet tall and numbered in the billions. They were a vital part of the forest ecology, a key food source for wildlife and an essential component of the human economy, according to Mila Kirkland, director of communications for TACF.

“Mountain people would use the wood to make everything from cradles to caskets,” she explained. “Chestnut is a very durable wood, so they would use it to build things like fences and posts.” Chestnuts also are nutritious and “were used in many foods, and also sold as a cash crop. (people) would also feed the nuts to their livestock, like cows and pigs.” Woodland creatures such as squirrels, grouse, deer and bear also depended on the chestnut crop every year for food.

In the beginning of the 20th century, however, an Asian fungus known as the chestnut blight spread rapidly through the American chestnut population. By 1950, the blight had killed an estimated four billion mature trees from Maine to Georgia.

Several attempts to breed blight-resistant trees in the mid-1900s were unsuccessful, but in the last five years TACF has found success breeding the American chestnut with Chinese varieties in an effort to produce a blight-resistant strain.

Now assisted by nearly 6,000 members, volunteers and partners, the organization is planting the potentially blight-resistant trees in select locations throughout the eastern U.S., including schools, libraries, national forests and on coal mine lands in Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky.

“We're hoping to restore the mountains back into natural forests,” Kirkland said.

The elementary students Friday were less interested in tree-breeding and more interested in examining several spiny chestnuts that officials had on hand.
First-grader Lucas Maslowski said he wouldn't mind tasting a chestnut, even though he couldn't figure out how a squirrel would get past the nuts' spiny outside shell in order to get to the edible center.

“It's all puffy and pokey, but today we learned that squirrels like to eat them,” he said. “Soon there's going to be a ton of chestnuts at our school!”

Jenkins Cowan, also in first grade, said she didn't know what a chestnut was, “so I asked. It's a cool kind of food” for people and animals, she said. “I would like to eat one. I think it would be kind of soft.”

Fourth-grader Eden Deso said he had fun planting the chestnut tree.

“You can eat the seeds,” he said, “but it looked pretty pokey — like it would hurt to eat it.”

“They look like porcupines!” shouted fellow fourth-grader Khalil Smith, “I want to eat it!”

After speaking with the kids about the importance of reviving the American chestnut population, Tree Board Chairman Mac Brackett said the Bruce Drysdale planting project was dedicated to the memory of founding member Stephen Black, a founding member of the Tree Board whose pro-tree advocacy led to the city's tree ordinance and by extension the work at Bruce Drysdale Friday.

“American chestnut ceremonial tree plantings such as this one in Hendersonville are vital to its restoration to the forests of North Carolina,” said Tom Saielli, southern regional science coordinator with TACF. “They allow us to share the fascinating story of the American chestnut and generate interest among local citizens to join in our efforts.”

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