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**Scouts and a scientist plant American chestnuts at Summit**

By Cody Neff *Register-Herald Reporter*

**THE SUMMIT —** The American chestnut tree has become hard to find. You might have seen a chestnut tree, but chances are that it was a Chinese chestnut or a Japanese chestnut. By 1950, a blight had killed about 4 billion trees from Maine to Georgia. The American chestnut is mostly gone.

In the future, that could all change.

Boy Scouts and volunteers worked with a scientist at the Summit Bechtel Reserve in Glen Jean to help plant hundreds of special American chestnut trees.

“Today we’re planting American chestnut trees that have been bred by my foundation, The American Chestnut Foundation,” Midatlantic Regional Science Coordinator Matt Brinckman said. “These are the result of over 30 years of breeding.

“They’re a sixth-generation tree. They’re 15/16ths American and 1/16 Chinese hybrid bred to be disease-resistant to the chestnut blight that took these trees out historically.”

Brinckman said the blight was brought over in the late 1800s.

“Wealthy landowners were importing Chinese and Japanese chestnuts to plant on their farms,” he said. “The Chinese chestnut is more of an orchard-type, open-grown tree. It’s got a broad form so it produces larger seeds. It’s often used for its nut production.

“Just like today where folks can import a variety of exotic species, once in a while something comes along with those. That’s the case with the chestnut blight. It was probably brought over on a Chinese or Japanese chestnut by accident.”

As soon as everyone realized what was happening, they started trying to save the tree.

“By about 1915 or so, they were aware of what was going on,” Brinckman said. “In the ’20s, when it was hitting Pennsylvania, what they did was try to quarantine the blight by cutting down every chestnut they could find within a 20-
mile band along the infected area.

“They were very effective at doing that, but the blight had probably already jumped that line before they even started.”

The blight is a fungus so the spores can be carried very far by the wind, by birds and by other animals. It spreads very quickly and easily.

“They did everything from cutting the trees down to trying to replace it with the Chinese chestnut,” he added. “The USDA was actually giving out Chinese chestnut to farmers to plant. That’s one of the reasons you’ll see Chinese chestnuts by old home sites and old farm buildings.”

Brinckman said they know the trees will get the blight; it’s just a matter of how well they can recover from the infection.

“Right now we’re in a testing period where, each year, we’re putting out large plantings similar to this, but more of a technical design to test the genetic resistance to the chestnut blight,” he said. “Over the years as we get more information back about how each genetic line is performing, we’re able to cull out the poor-performing trees in our seed orchard and improve that resistance.

“It’s kind of up in the air, but we know we have some trees that have a very strong resistance. This will be a process over the next several hundred years.”

This generation of trees has been bred since 2008, Brinckman said.

“We do partner with the Forest Service and we’ve got some test plantings all across the Monongahela National Forest and we’ve also done some mine-land reclamation plantings,” he said. “We did two of those about 30 acres last year.”

If you think you’ve found an American chestnut, you can have it tested by the American Chestnut Foundation. Visit www.acf.org and click on “Think You’ve Found an American Chestnut” for more information.

“I usually ask folks how well it’s doing,” Brinckman said. “If they tell me it’s doing great and it’s big, bushy, and producing lots of nuts, that usually tells me it’s Chinese.

“We actually have a form that folks can fill out if they think they’ve found an American chestnut. They can clip a leaf and twig sample and I can do an ID for it in the lab.”

Helping to plant these trees falls in line with several Boy Scout ideals, so they had to get involved, an official said.

“We’ve gathered Scouts from three different counties — Summers, Raleigh and Fayette counties — so they can learn about the American chestnut and also to give back to their community,” Buckskin Council Seneca District Commissioner Kimberly Bennett said. They can give back by helping reintroduce this tree.

“It gets them out here working and enjoy doing community service. If we don’t teach them when they’re young to give back to the community, who will? Who will take over for us?”

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