Working toward a chestnut comeback

BY HOLLY KAYS

With a population that doesn’t quite break 1,000 and few enough restaurants that one can count them on one’s fingers, it’s safe to say that Meadowview, Va., is a small town. But when it comes to American chestnuts, Meadowview is a big name. The town is home to The American Chestnut Foundation’s Meadowview Research Farms, America’s most advanced arsenal in the 100-plus-year fight to restore the former glory of the vanished forest giants. This fall marks the farm’s 25th anniversary in the fight against chestnut blight, a fight that ACF believes is entering the home stretch.

“The classic American chestnut of old could be 100 feet tall,” said Doug Levin, one of a core group of volunteers with ACF’s Southwest Virginia Branch who make the farm tick. “It could be 15 feet in diameter. They were monstrous. I’ve read they could be considered the redwoods of the east.”

Chestnuts composed 20 percent or more of eastern forests, covering as much as one-third of the Smokies. People used their strong, light wood for virtually every purpose imaginable. As for the nuts, people ate them, fed them to livestock and hunted game animals that depended on the nuts for food.

“It was called the cradle to the grave tree because it was used for literally everything from cradles to caskets,” Levin said. “People almost had an emotional connection to these trees.”

A fungus introduced from Asia in 1904 spelled the end of the chestnut. It was a catastrophic loss for Appalachia, the region’s game species and forest health. A smattering of individual researchers started to develop a blight-resistant cross of American chestnut and its cousin, the Chinese chestnut, but it took until 1983, when the American Chestnut Foundation formed, for a large-scale restoration effort.

“The way the breeding program works, at the very beginning a surviving American was crossed with a Chinese chestnut tree,” Levin explained. “What you ended up with was an American-Chinese half-and-half. That’s where you started. Every cross since then has actually been a backcross with an American.”

The first generation of trees is 50 percent American, the second generation 75 percent, with the ratio rising to seven-eighths and fifteen-sixteenths. Trees that don’t resist the blight or that retain too many Chinese characteristics are eliminated along the way, so a tree that is fifteen-sixteenths American is considered American enough, retaining hardly any of its Chinese characteristics beyond the essential one: blight resistance.

With 25 years of chestnut farming experience, the folks at Meadowview now have fifteen-sixteenths trees that are 20 to 30 feet high—they’d be even taller, Levin said, if they were living in a forest, but meadow life causes trees to grow shorter and wider than taller and narrower. Test plots across the region are now growing fifteen-sixteenths trees, and Levin said ACF expects to start releasing blight-resistant chestnuts into American forests within the next decade or so.

It’s cause for celebration. Guests at an Oct. 11 fundraiser will enjoy roasted chestnuts, locally-crafted chestnut beer and, of course, a hay ride tour of the 150-acre farm. Chestnut-themed children’s activities also will be held.

“Those kinds of celebrations don’t come around often,” Levin said.

Restoring the American chestnut is about a lot more than just saving a tree, he said. It’s about restoring a cultural icon of the Appalachians, and thanks to the work of dedicated researchers, growers, and other volunteers, restoring the chestnut to its forest glory is seeming more and more to be a story of success.

“In a way, maybe, that’s something that draws us without our realizing it,” Levin said. “It’s something that’s very hopeful.”