



Photo by Becky Alghrary

Avery County tree grower Ted Farmer stands beside a chestnut tree undergoing pollination on his property.

Scientists preserve chestnut trees in Avery

By BECKY ALGHRARY
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Do you have a chestnut tree on your property? A few trees have survived the blight first discovered in 1904 that led to the trees' annihilation by the 1950s – and some of them are right here in Avery County.

Now, thanks to the Meadowview Research Farms located in southwest Virginia, good root systems, or viable trees can be brought back to life and made resistant to chestnut blight in the future. The American Chestnut Foundation uses traditional breeding techniques to develop a blight-resistant American chestnut.

On Monday, July 10, Zachary Lesch-Huie and David Flood were busy pollinating a good sized tree on Ted Farmer's property on Bartlett Farmer Road using brown and white paper bags.

"The program tries to blend blight-resistance into an American tree. We do this by combining the American tree with the Chinese chestnut. That's basically what we're doing here – pollinating the chestnut flowers to get a Chinese-American hybrid in the fall. The tree will then have nuts that can be used to plant more trees," said Lesch-Huie. There's a tree just up the road that we successfully pollinated last year and we've gotten a lot of nuts off of that.

According to the two young men, the root system of two trees being treated at Farmer's are probably about 100 years old, but the trees themselves that have now grown, are about 30 years old.

"The Chinese chestnut is more of a shrubby-tree that doesn't have any of the characteristics of the American chestnut. What we want is the blight-resistance of the Chinese chestnut bred into a tree that has all the characteristics of the massive American chestnut," said Flood.

The offspring of the American-Chinese tree will be crossed for four generations until a blight-resistant tree is produced.

Pollen from Chinese-American hybrid trees is sent to the Virginia research center to be used to pollinate the American chestnut.

The project was overseen by Dr. Paul Sisco who is the Southeast's Regional Science Coordinator for Meadowview Research Farms.

The scientists want to know about more surviving chestnuts in the Avery County area. If you have a tree with a leaf identical to that pictured or a tree that has the long pale yellow flower and the prickly burr, contact the research institute and they will be happy to come out and begin the pollination process on your chestnut trees. More information may be obtained from The American Chestnut Foundation at P. O. Box 4044, Bennington, VT 05201-4044, or by calling (802) 447-0110, or on the internet at chestnut@acf.org -- www.acf.org.



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If you have leaves with these long pale yellow flowers on a tree on your property, it's an American chestnut and can be treated.