

CHESTNUT NEWSLETTER #1

June 2002

News from the Maryland American Chestnut group --- currently an un-organized collection of people with one common interest: preservation and restoration of the American Chestnut tree. Many of us are members of the American Chestnut Foundation, and hope to eventually find sufficient interest, and people, to form a chapter of that Foundation. Others have taken part in activities of the American Chestnut Cooperators Foundation. We welcome everyone interested in chestnuts!

SOME RECENT ACTIVITIES: About 15 members of our group met at ThorpeWood, near Thurmont, MD on March 30. We discussed future plans, including setting up a database of American chestnuts in Maryland, looking for suitable locations for future breeding orchards, grafting, etc. Robert Strasser agreed to be president of our incipient chapter, and Doug Boucher vice-president. Essie Burnworth will maintain the proposed database, and Barbara Knapp will keep track of members' names and addresses. Then we went up to the orchard at ThorpeWood and planted nuts collected last fall from Jim Hill's and Barbara Knapp's trees. We also inspected how well the trees planted here in previous years are thriving.

On April 4, Doug Boucher spoke to the monthly meeting of the Montgomery County Master Gardeners, on the subject of restoring the American Chestnut. Following the meeting, several of us went over to the Park & Planning Commission's Pope Farm nursery, to see the 16 American Chestnut seedlings they have growing in pots in their "Reforestation barn." These were obtained from the American Chestnut Cooperators a year ago, and apparently no one has yet decided where to plant them eventually.

POLLINATION WORKSHOP: Towards the end of June, depending on when the chestnuts are in flower, we are planning to visit one of the Pennsylvania ACF chapter's backcross orchards for a mini workshop on pollination. The goal of this group activity is to provide a hands-on opportunity for those who wish to participate in application of pollen to flowers for making a controlled cross. This is our chance to learn from the experienced hands of our northern neighbors skills which may help in our own future efforts to capture some of Maryland's native chestnut germplasm into backcross lines. Robert Strasser is leading the group, which will meet at ThorpeWood at 10:00am. Estimated driving time is 1.5 hours. Bring a bag lunch and plan to work for an hour or two at the orchard of Bob and Ann Leffel near York, PA. The Leffels are a driving force in the hugely successful Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation; the chapter was formed in 1995 and now numbers over 800 members.

If you would like to participate in this activity, please contact Robert Strasser, or Barbara Knapp (addresses at the end of this newsletter) so we can let you know the exact date as soon as that is available. Directions to ThorpeWood can be found at www.thorpewood.org, or call 301-271-2823. Those who live further east may prefer to go directly to the Leffel's, meeting there at about 11:30 am. See directions at end of newsletter.

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR CHESTNUT RESEARCH: Dr. Doug Boucher of Hood College is looking for volunteers to help with his chestnut research this summer. He's studying the growth and survival of wild American chestnuts in the forest at 8 sites in central Maryland (Frederick, Montgomery and Howard counties), and will be remeasuring and looking for flowering on about 2000 trees. The work will take place between about June 20th and July 15th, and volunteers could work as little as half a day or as much as three weeks. All equipment will be provided.

If you're interested, contact him at (301) 696-3662, or by sending an email to: dboucher@hood.edu. (Note that he'll be out of the country until June 12th, however.)

JIM HILL, WHO LIVES NEAR MT. AIRY, MD, PROVIDES THIS INFORMATION ON HIS PRIZE TREE: In 1972 my wife and I bought a 5 acre wooded lot which had been part of a chestnut forest. One tall 4 inch diameter chestnut stood out because of its apparent complete freedom from the chestnut blight. It was poorly situated being dominated by mature canopy oaks. In 1975 when it's growth rate seem to be very slow, I removed one large red oak thus leaving a hole in the canopy directly above it. Immediately the hole in the canopy began to close in but the aggressiveness of the chestnut's growth made it clear why the American chestnut was the most common tree in the east.

The chestnut is now 12 1/2 inches DBH and in the canopy. At 87 feet it is already as tall as the trees around it and its growth rate of one foot per year is grater than theirs.

Based on a comparison with another nearby chestnut recently killed by blight, and a history of the area, I estimate its age at between 65 and 85 years. It still has no apparent effect from the blight. The down side to its growth is the limited access to pollen.

In order to provide a convenient source of its pollen, scionwood was sent to Ed Greenwell, the ACCF Tennessee Director, to make nut grafts. It is too soon to estimate the results of this effort but we expect to receive the resulting clones in November when they will be dormant. They will be grown at ThorpeWood.

Jim suggests that more information about nut grafting can be found at url <http://chestnuts.freesevers.com/custom.html>

DATABASE OF AMERICAN CHESTNUT TREES IN MARYLAND: At the March 30 meeting at ThorpeWood, we decided to establish and maintain a computerized database of American chestnuts in Maryland. Based on a form used for a similar purpose by the PA chapter of TACF, we have prepared a draft form to be used to capture information about the trees. This form covers a complete description of tree location and how to contact the owner of the property. There is also a section to describe the tree itself and its surroundings. Observations about the condition of the tree with respect to the blight can be recorded with check boxes. Finally, there is a section for recording the contact information for the person identifying the tree for our database.

Once the form has been reviewed and refined by Dr. Boucher and others, paper copies will be distributed to anyone interested in recording tree data. Metal tags will be provided by Dr. Boucher so that each tree can always be correctly associated with its data. Completed forms will then be mailed or e-mailed to Essie Burnworth, who has agreed to set up and maintain the database. Once the database is established, an update form will be designed and distributed for maintaining current information on individual trees.

NOTE: This newsletter has been sent to people for whom we have an e-mail address, and also by regular mail to others who have indicated an interest, and who live within a reasonable distance of locations at which we may be meeting. Eventually we will send a mailing to all TACF members in Maryland, or even the Mid-Atlantic Region. Please let us know if you have an e-mail address!

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Barbara Knapp 301-428-0044 BBKnapp@slsoft.com

Directions to Leffel Farm: Go north on I-83 towards York, PA. Take new exit #14 (Old Exit 4), Rt. 182. Go east on 182; it will dead end at Rt. 74. Go right on Route 74, through Dallastown and Red Lion, then about 5 or so miles from traffic light in center of town, turn right on Laurel Road. (There is a small sign for the St. James Lutheran Church and one for Fiddlers Association at this intersection.) Go about 1.6 miles to Leffel Farm on the left, just before you get to the church. Park on right in field in front of house. Leffel phone no.: 717-927-9557.