



OUTLOOK

Ohio University
News & Information

Ambitious project is an environment 'twofer' *Tree driven nearly to extinction is back and poised to heal strip mine*

ATHENS, Ohio (March 30, 2007) -- Ohio University researchers are preparing for an ambitious environmental two-for-one project that could help revive a tree nearly driven to extinction and at the same time help reclaim land damaged by strip mining.

Researchers will reforest a reclaimed strip mine in Muskingum County Saturday, March 31, by planting 1,500 American chestnut tree seedlings. The chestnut, once called the "redwood of the east," thrived in eastern Ohio and the eastern United States before being decimated by blight. Researchers have been crossbreeding the American chestnut with the Chinese chestnut to create a blight-resistant strain. The new version of the species is 15/16ths American chestnut.

"We have very high expectations that these chestnut trees will take root and be successful," Brian McCarthy, Ohio University forest ecologist and secretary of the Ohio chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, said.

More than 10 students from Ohio University will help plant the seedlings on three acres of the Tri-Valley Wildlife Area, which includes more than 16,200 acres of reclaimed strip mine. Few other hardwood trees have successfully been grown on reclaimed mine land, but the American chestnut has the ability to grow in poor, acidic soil, making it a good candidate for success.

The newly crossbred species isn't the only innovation. To prepare the ground for the seedlings, bulldozers ripped up the earth on Wednesday. That contrasts to previous mine reclamation efforts, which involved compacting and contouring soil; researchers now believe that fresh, loose soil will eliminate competition from other plants and give the chestnut a better chance at survival.

"We have great soil prep work and an environment that looks very conducive for chestnut seedling planting and survival," McCarthy said.

The project is being funded with a \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Surface Mines and done in cooperation with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. Researchers and students from Miami University also will take part. The state of Ohio purchased the site in 1996 for \$3.9 million. This will be the largest planting of American chestnut on Ohio public land.

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