

American chestnut seedlings test blight resistance

By Bob Fowler
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 PIONEER, Tenn.- Students from two counties planted an American legend in a windswept wasteland atop Zeb Mountain last week.

Much of their efforts to coax American chestnut seedlings into growing in rocky mine spoils are doomed to fail, Barry Thacker said.

Years from now, many of those young trees will likely succumb to the same blight that ravaged trees that were once king of the American forest.

But the strong that survive will help in the decades-long attempt to restore chestnut trees. They'll give clues on how best to plant a hybrid, blight-resistant variety that will soon become widely available, said Thacker, president of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation.

Students from Lake City Middle School in Anderson County and Campbell County's Elk Valley Elementary School planted American chestnut seeds in their classrooms in January.

They traveled with their seedlings through National Coal Corp.'s active surface mine to the crest of 2,300-foot-tall Zeb Mountain in Campbell County last week to transplant them in a barren field of rock and dirt.

"It's ugly," Thacker said of the site. "It's a pile of rocks, but it's Nirvana to the chestnuts," he said.

"Looks don't count in this situation. Come back in 20 years, and you'll have a forest here."

Research shows trees grow faster on reclaimed mine sites where soil is left loose and rocky, Thacker said.

"Anything we can do to bring these (chestnut) trees back would be great," said Tim Rudder, reclamation specialist with the U.S. Office of Surface Mining. "It will pay dividends down the road."

That office has funded a grant for the American Chestnut Foundation to research options for planting the blight-resistant hybrid nuts on reclaimed strip mine sites.

The foundation is developing the hybrid that blends mainly American chestnut with Chinese chestnuts that carried the blight that killed the American type.

Chestnuts once widely populated American forests, Thacker said. Early settlers used the trees to build homes, make furniture and tan leather, he said.

Last spring, students planted 500 chestnuts on the mountaintop, and more than half of them came up, Thacker said.

"It's a really fun activity," Lake City Middle student Holley Smith said as she and classmate Kimberly Phillips finished planting a seedling last week. "I think it helps our environment a little bit."

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