

The Wealth of Knowledge Gained from One Field Trip

By Taylor Adkins

From my point of view, the American chestnut stands as a symbol of North America's dwindling wilderness. However, unlike the grizzly bear and bald eagle, I never thought that someday this tree would have the potential to rule the forests as it had before.

When I was younger, I, like many others, thought the American chestnut was completely extinct. However, as I got older I learned that they continue to grow (though much smaller), despite the destructive blight which practically wiped them out by the mid 1950's. So, stumbling across an American chestnut sprout while hiking became a joy.

I couldn't always distinguish the Chinese chestnut from the American until I took Heather Butler's Plant Life of Virginia course at Virginia Western Community College, where I began to understand the difference between the two. The Plant Life of Virginia class is a summer course that focuses on the different plant communities or associations that are found in Virginia. We have been using Timothy Spira's guide, *Wildflowers and Plant Communities of the Southern Appalachian Mountains and Piedmont*, that group plants by their associations and describes the abiotic factors that make those associations. We were on a field trip to Dragon's Tooth on the Appalachian Trail when we stumbled upon several American chestnut seedlings, sparking our interest in this lost species.

It wasn't until I visited The American Chestnut foundation (TACF), that I was shown a Chinese chestnut and American chestnut side by side. Witnessing the difference in the way each leaf curls, the sheen, and the color, made the distinction much clearer. It also made seeing the tendrils of the chestnut flower on the side of a trail or peaking above a forest, a little more

exciting. After learning the difference between the two, I recognized how brutal the blight can be, how it damages the tree, and that it can cause a very prolonged death.

While I've dreamt of coming across an American chestnut in its full glory, I eventually came to believe it would not be possible. However, my thinking changed when I moved to Roanoke and encountered the hybrid chestnuts at the top of Mill Mountain and how well they were doing, compared to the little sprouts I had come across in the forests. I discovered TACF and learned how much effort they're making into restoring this magnificent species, and it's given me hope that my dream will someday be reality. At that time, I wasn't able to offer much in the way of volunteering, so it fell to the back of my mind. A year and a half later, I had the opportunity to listen to TACF Virginia Chapter member, Carl Absher explain the labor and passion of the Foundation to develop a blight-resistant tree. He discussed the intricacies of the selective breeding process and the work involved. The amount of time and painstaking effort it must have taken to create what is now known as the B3F3 hybrid, is truly amazing. Though it takes years for each generation to grow and breed, not including the rigorous selection process, the progress is astounding and gives me hope that I might one day see the American chestnut rule the forests once again.