



The West Virginia Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation NEWSLETTER



In the heart of American chestnut's natural range

November 2025

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Table of Contents

Rowlesburg Chestnut Festival.....Page 1
Burlington Public Library.....Page 4
New Creek Lake.....Page 5
Waddell Orchard Tours.....Page 5
Note from Hawaiian Member.....Page 6
WV Grant Program for 2026.....Page 6
Some Frequently Asked Question...Page 7



Rowlesburg Chestnut Festival

The 17th annual chestnut festival was held on 12 October 2025 in Rowlesburg. Vendors sold their wares in the park adjacent to the Szilagyi Center where the meetings were held. **Robert Sypolt** sold potted chestnut seedlings. **Charles Wotring** sold his exquisite chestnut works, some of which are seen in the photo below.



Wotring started building chestnut furniture in earnest when he was in high school. He said he had a good shop teacher who encouraged his students. He has been making chestnut furniture for 78 years. He made a covered wagon with a pen knife at the age of 8, and he took it to school. He still has the wagon; it is in his attic. Building furniture is just a hobby for Wotring. He doesn't work for the money, and the Rowlesburg chestnut festival is the only festival he attends with his chestnut items. He has shown his works at all 17 chestnut festivals. Woodworking is in the Wotring family. His brother made the rifles for the West Virginia University Mountaineer.



Musicians sang in the park at the chestnut festival.

A number of Preston High School students volunteered at the festival. Some, as seen below, helped with roasting chestnuts.



High School students help roast and bag chestnuts.

The WV chapter meeting began at noon in a second-floor classroom in the Szilagyi Center. The first order of business was the election of **Amy Metheny** as the newest WV chapter board member. Amy works at West Virginia University in Plant Pathology, and she has worked on chestnut issues for several years. Amy, originally from Mercer County, WV, brings youth to the board, along with great enthusiasm for chestnut. She is a great addition to the WV board of directors.

WV chapter president, **Bernie Coyle**, introduced the WV chapter board members who were in attendance. Bernie presented an overview of the history American

chestnut along with current restoration efforts.



Amy Metheny, new member of the WV chapter board of directors



WV chapter president, Bernie Coyle opened with meeting with a presentation on chestnut history and restoration efforts.

Mark Double presented a recap of the WV chapter activities from the past year. Some of those activities include:

- >1,000 nuts were potted in late February 2025 at the WVU greenhouse. Shoot development varied greatly among the American chestnuts—ranging from 25% to 100% with an average of 77% after 4 weeks. The backcross nuts yielded 69% for D5-17-89 and 28% for LSF2-B7162 OP #76.

- Distributed chestnut seedlings to WV chapter members plus the WV Division of Forestry and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.
- Lecture to a WVU Horticulture Class
- Lecture to a WVU Conservation Biology Class
- Presentation to the Elkins Tree Board
- A chestnut booth was set up at the Master Gardener Conference, Canaan Valley.
- Central Preston Middle School Classes were educated on the American chestnut story.
- A work day at the Summit Bechtel Reserve was held.
- Lecture to TCEnergy in Charleston
- Chestnut field plots of Dr. Melissa Thomas-VanGundy were assessed.
- Chestnut plantings occurred at Berkeley Springs, The Woods, Holly River State Park, Jennings Randolph Lake and Kingsford Charcoal.
- A work day was held at the Parsons chestnut orchard.
- A chestnut booth was displayed at the Maryland Native Plant Festival, and the Hampshire County Fair.
- A video of Waddell Orchard for Preston High School was produced.
- A presentation/orchard tour was held for 270 Preston High School students covering 16 biology classes.
- 8 WV chapter newsletters are produced each year.
- A group of volunteers harvested nearly 2,000 chestnuts from Clements Tree Nursery, Allegheny Front and Parsons in September 2025.
- A presentation was held for the New Creek Lake Homeowner's Association, in Keyser.

Cassie Stark, TACF's Mid-Atlantic Regional Science Coordinator, talked about TACF's recurrent genomic selection (RGS, also known as the 'Best X Best' program). Progeny tests are planted to evaluate average performance of chestnut trees. The goal of the RGS program is to produce 7,000 seeds per year with 2,400 going to progeny tests across the American chestnut range (100 trees per site). The WV chapter will be the recipient of two RGS plantings (Burnsville and Parsons). Seedlings were potted at TACF's Meadowview, VA greenhouse in February 2025. With the new heated greenhouse, the seedlings will be overwintered before planting in May 2026. Leaf samples are taken with a hole punch, and the DNA of all 7,000 is being analyzed. Cost of genotyping is \$18/tree. Genetic markers are being checked to predict the best disease resistance in the seedlings. In 4-5 years after the seedlings are planted, the trees that are >1.5" in diameter will be inoculated with a virulent isolate of the chestnut blight fungus to assess their disease resistance. Data will be taken to see if the

predictions made in 2025 were accurate after inoculations are made in 2030.

Backcross breeding is not an easy task. Moving forward, RGS is being used to accelerate genetic gains. TACF is continually selecting individuals with superior genetic traits to improve populations. Trees are evaluated using seven traits: (1) Is the main stem alive?; (2) Are cankers greater than 15 cm in size?; (3) Are cankers sunken?; (4) What % of the canopy is dead?; (5) Is there exposed wood in the canker?; (6) Is the canker sporulating?; and (7) Are there stump sprouts?

The DNA data is used to predict blight resistance, *Phytophthora* resistance and forest competitiveness. Trees in the progeny tests that survive 7-10 years will be used for future breeding.

Sam Muncy, WV chapter treasurer, talked about the chestnut trees at the Summit Bechtel Reserve (SBR) in Fayette County. SBR is a national scout jamboree site and a high adventure camp; it will be the site of the Jamboree, July 22-31, 2026.

The chestnut trees at SBR require maintenance, replanting, etc., and Sam thanked the following members for their assistance over the years: **Lewis Cook, Joe Golden, Jerry Legg, Robert Sypolt, Rick Sypolt, and Steve Swank**. Sam also acknowledged the help of Troop 1885 leaders, **Lee Webb** and **Kim Bennett**. Lee and his two sons attended the WV chapter sessions in Rowlesburg. Sam also thanked **Rob Seiter**, the SBR facilities manager for his assistance in mowing and digging holes. Rob also keeps an eye out for any problems with the chestnut trees.

In 2014, former TACF Mid-Atlantic Regional Science Coordinator, **Matt Brinckman**, supervised the planting of 300 B₃F₃ bareroot chestnut seedlings at the SBR Consol Bridge. This was not an ideal site as it had highly compacted soil and the presence of *Phytophthora*. It was, however, the chance to get a 'foot in the door' at SBR. More than 50 people helped plant in April 2014 (Scouts, TACF members and master naturalists). In May 2014, a chestnut tree named 'Albert' was planted. Albert has been instrumental over the years as an integral part of the chestnut story, as scouts are provided minimal information on Albert's location, and they are challenged with finding Albert. At the 2017 scout jamboree, there were 45,000 scouts from across the world, and many of them were involved with finding Albert.

Sam provided an update on the many chestnut sites at SBR.

- **Consol Bridge.** The original 300 trees have been supplemented with 100 additional trees over the years. Ninety trees are alive. This is a high visibility site and some trees are >15' tall.
- The **Conservation Trail** has 5 living trees. One tree is 12' tall.
- The **Murray Road** site has 16 of 19 trees alive, planted in 2019. The trees are 5'-7' tall.
- The **Freedom Trail** site has 8 surviving out of 16 trees. This is another site with high visibility.
- The **Large Woodlot** orchard has 4 trees living out of the 19 that were planted in 2021. The survivors are 12" to 18" high.
- The **Fire Ring North** site (highest part of SBR) has 10 living out of 40 trees. This site has good soil, but there have been deer and cow problems disturbing the seedlings. There are plans to enclose 1 acre with a wire net fence.

In 2019, Sam and Sharon Cottrill began making embroidered patches, as seen below. They are beautiful, and a great keepsake for the scouts.



Sam has requested 200 seedlings in 2026 to replace voids in some of the SBR chestnut plantings.

Following the afternoon technical session, the Gala Banquet was held in the Szilagyi Center where Mr. and Mrs. Chestnut for 2026 were crowned. This year's royalty were **Dr. Melissa Thomas-VanGundy** and her husband, **Doug VanGundy**. Melissa grew up in eastern PA, but she participated in caving and camping trips in WV. She received her B.S. from Davis and Elkins College, her M.S. from the State University of New York, Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, NY and her Ph.D. from West Virginia University. She is a research forester for

the USDA Forest Service in Parsons. Melissa has published her analysis of the association of site factors for American chestnut listed on old land grants and deeds from 1752-1899. She also tracks the height and diameter of hybrid chestnut trees planted on the Monongahela National Forest in cooperation with TACF. Melissa is a board member for the WV chapter where she served as the chair of the mother tree program. She also oversees the WV chapter grant program.



Doug and Melissa, Mr. and Mrs. Chestnut for 2026 are flanked by Bernie and Linda Coyle.

Doug VanGundy is the director of the Master of Fine Arts program at West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon. Doug is a poet and musician steeped in Appalachian traditions of nature. His work is widely published including his first book of poetry, *A Life Above the Water*, the anthology, *Eyes Glowing at the Edge of the Woods: Fiction and Poetry* and a photo essay, *A Fierce Desire to Stay: Looking at West Virginia Through its People's Eyes*. Doug and Melissa have been married for 34 years, and they are wonderful chestnut ambassadors.

Following the banquet, WV chapter president, **Bernie Coyle** gave a talk about chestnut trees on the Allegheny Front.

Burlington Public Library

Linda Coyle put up a chestnut display at the Burlington Library (Mineral County). By doing so, Linda met a woman whose son is very interested in American chestnut. The Burlington library has a STEM program on Tuesdays that children ages 6-10 attend. The library offers programs on Thursdays for teens and adults. The branch manager of the Burlington library is **Cesily Dolly**. Thanks to Linda for taking

the time to put up the chestnut display and educate library patrons about the story of the American chestnut.



Burlington Library chestnut display.

New Creek Lake Property Owner's Association

Bernie Coyle spoke to the New Creek Lake Property Owner's Association at their annual meeting. New Creek is an unincorporated community in Mineral County, six miles south of Keyser. There were about 15 members in attendance at the annual meeting, and they were excited to hear about **Tommy Trask** and Bernie Coyle's expedition to harvest nuts on the Allegheny Front. Bernie indicated that many members are excited about getting chestnut seedlings next year, so the WV chapter may have more members. Thanks also goes out to **Lane Tephabock** for his help in harvesting chestnuts.



Lane Tephabock and Tommy Trask harvesting chestnuts.

Waddell Chestnut Orchard at Preston High School

The Waddell chestnut orchard is on the backside of Preston County High School, and it serves as a living laboratory for biology students at Preston High School. This fall, **Robert Sybolt**, **Bernie** and **Linda Coyle** led tours to 16 classes, totaling 270 students, an amazing number. Students were educated on the history of American chestnut, the restoration efforts and were able to see active chestnut blight cankers, sprouting, and burs. In the orchard, students were afforded the opportunity to distinguish among the different chestnut species via leaves, hairs and twigs.



Preston High School students listen to Robert Sybolt.



Bernie Coyle, left, and Robert Sybolt talk to one of the 16 biology classes at Preston High School.

The above pictures at the Waddell orchard were taken by **Tina Cool**, science teacher at Preston High School. Tina has been a helpful chestnut collaborator, as she promotes the chestnut story. Our thanks to Tina for her assistance over the years.

Note from a Member in Hawaii

"Although I live in Hawaii now, your organization's efforts are laudable, and gives me a way to support in a small way the eastern forests that I grew up loving (though nary a chestnut tree in sight). I appreciate your work and that of others to bring back the American chestnut".

WV Chapter Grant Program

**West Virginia Chapter of
The American Chestnut Foundation
Due: 31 Jan 2026**

We invite members of the West Virginia chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation and other interested parties to apply for grants up to a maximum of \$2,000 to support education, outreach and scholarly activities related to American chestnut in the State of West Virginia.

Purpose

Grants are available to assist individuals with active restoration projects in the State, outreach activities, as well as with their scholarly activities. Funding may be requested for supporting a range of ideas and projects, including but not limited to: chestnut demonstration plantings; signage for new or existing planting; travel and supplies for maintenance of existing plantings; educational outreach; research and scholarship related to chestnut restoration in West Virginia. Funding for completed work is not allowed unless the project has had prior approval by the WV chapter Board of Directors. Travel funds for conferences are not available unless you/your group will be representing the West Virginia Chapter.

Rules and Responsibilities

Recipients must be a current member in good standing with the West Virginia Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation, WV-TACF (see **TACF.org** to join). Each recipient is expected to present a summary of the results of the funded project to the West Virginia Chapter at a chapter meeting within two years of the award. Publications, public and private presentations, and other products derived from work funded by the WV-TACF must include acknowledgment of the funding received from the Chapter.

Information and products of the funded work are required to be freely disseminated by the American Chestnut Foundation unless protected by copyright.

Proposal Guidelines and submission

Proposal ideas should be discussed with the President of the West Virginia Chapter and/or members of the Board of Directors prior to submitting the written proposal. Proposals should be submitted electronically to WV board member, Dr. Melissa Thomas-Van Gundy (melissa.thomasvangundy@usda.gov) and include the following page of this document (with completed information) as a cover. The proposal should be three pages maximum (including the cover page), single-spaced, in Times New Roman (minimum 12 pt), minimum 1" margins. Proposals over the page limit will not be considered.

Research Grant Guidelines:

- Brief project overview, including goals, expected impact and relevance to chestnut restoration
- Proposed activities and connections to project goals, including a project timeline
- Plans for dissemination (e.g., publications and presentations) and subsequent funding proposals (if applicable)

Attach a list of references cited, a line-item budget, evidence of cost-sharing (e.g., proposal, letter of award), and a description of special technology or infrastructure considerations (if applicable).

Education and Outreach Grant Guidelines

- Brief project overview, including goals, target audience and participants
- Proposed activities, including a project timeline and detailed budget (including shared costs)
- Plans for maintaining trees (if project involves tree planting)

Proposals will be evaluated by a subcommittee of the WV-TACF Board of Directors. Proposal reviewers will not necessarily be experts in any specific field, and therefore proposals should be written clearly for the educated layperson.

WV-TACF GRANT APPLICATION COVER SHEET

Deadline: 31 Jan 2026

Award announcement date: 01 March 2026

**Submit electronically to: Dr. Melissa Thomas-Van Gundy
(melissa.thomasvangundy@usda.gov)**

Name (s)

E-mail(s):

Phone number(s):

Project Title:

Amount Requested:

Previous Grant Awardee? ____ Yes ____ No

Year of Last Award (N/A if not applicable) ____

Amount awarded (will be completed by subcommittee):

Some Frequently Asked Questions

Why is restoration of the American chestnut so important?

The American chestnut was an important foundation species in eastern forests before getting extirpated by an invasive pathogen. With restoration, we have the opportunity to reverse a catastrophic loss facilitated by human action. Restoration of the American chestnut would provide a valuable food source for wildlife and humans, a prized timber product, and the opportunity to sequester carbon and to help mitigate climate change.

How was chestnut blight introduced? What causes the blight? Where is it from? How did it get here?

The chestnut blight fungus, *Cryphonectria parasitica*, was accidentally imported on plant material in the late

19th Century and first identified as a new pathogen in New York City in 1904. The blight—an Asian fungus to which our native chestnuts have very little resistance—spread quickly. By 1950, 400 billion American chestnut trees that could once be found across 180 million acres of eastern forests had disappeared. Only shrubby sprouts remain, growing from the still-living roots, which also become infected.

I thought the American chestnut was extinct, but I saw one the other day. How can that be?

It is a common misconception that the American chestnut is extinct. In fact, there are still millions of American chestnut sprouts throughout the native range, mostly in forested areas. Unfortunately, these sprouts rarely survive to maturity and for that reason we consider the American chestnut to be 'functionally extinct' in the wild. These survivors, however, make our breeding program possible.

What does The American Chestnut Foundation do?

The mission of The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) is to restore the American chestnut tree to its native range. TACF is restoring a species, and in the process, creating a template for restoration of other tree and plant species. We operate the Meadowview Research Farms in Meadowview, VA, and rely on an expansive network of volunteer state chapters to advance our work.

How is TACF restoring the American chestnut?

TACF engages in a multi-pronged effort to create a disease-resistant American chestnut, including traditional breeding techniques, genetic modification, and reduction of fungal virulence.

The majority of TACF staff and volunteers are involved in an advanced breeding approach called Recurrent Genomic Selection (RGS) that uses genetic testing to maximize breeding selections. Sometimes referred to as 'Best by Best' this approach is expected to significantly increase resistance to *Phytophthora* root rot and chestnut blight within two breeding generations, while maintaining American chestnut form and function. In addition, efforts are made to conserve the range-wide genetic diversity of this growing population of trees for use in future breeding.

TACF is also working with a variety of scientific partners to develop transgenic (introducing genes from

other plant species) and cisgenic (introducing genes from other chestnut species of the same genus) methods to increase blight resistance, as well as other genetic methods such as RNAi (RNA interference) to impede growth of the blight fungus.

No matter the method, whether used independently or in combination, the goal is to produce American-type chestnuts capable of surviving and reproducing in the forest unassisted.

In addition to improving disease-resistance, TACF and its affiliates are working to conserve the genetic diversity of the species, assess susceptibility to other pests and pathogens (in addition to chestnut blight), and to understand the ecology of the species in order to prepare for landscape-scale reintroduction.

What do TACF State Chapters do?

TACF state chapters are the backbone of a breeding program for regional adaptability and are essential partners in the effort to capture sufficient genetic diversity to permit long term survival of the species. Chapters participate in TACF's breeding program, manage plantings, inventory wild trees, participate in outreach events, and give talks and presentations in their local communities. Select 'Find a Chapter' in the main menu at TACF.org.

How are potentially blight-resistant chestnuts being produced and tested?

Testing of potentially blight-resistant chestnuts is conducted primarily using progeny testing at our Meadowview Research Farms, as well as in partnership with cooperators assisting in a formal, rigorous testing program. We are also developing genomic tools to help better assess this generation of chestnuts by identifying genetic markers for resistance. In addition, we ask any member with potentially blight-resistant plantings to report back regularly on the performance of their trees.

Why can't you just take resistance genes from the Chinese chestnut and put it into the American chestnut through gene splicing?

One of the main roadblocks to this approach is that we have not yet isolated all the genes associated with blight resistance in the Chinese chestnut. TACF has made substantial progress in identifying candidate genes from Chinese chestnut that may contribute to

blight resistance. We are collaborating with researchers from Virginia Tech to validate whether these genes (more than 50) play a role in blight resistance.

Does TACF have other goals beyond breeding blight-resistant American chestnut trees?

In addition to increasing blight resistance, we are working to incorporate resistance to Phytophthora root rot, conserve native American chestnut germplasm, educate the public, and collaborate on many other projects to support the overall restoration of the species.

Are there scientific reviews of TACF's work?

Since 1983, the work of TACF has resurrected hope that the American chestnut can eventually be restored as a foundation species in the eastern deciduous forest.

As The American Chestnut Foundation continues to evolve, we seek to have our breeding techniques and scientific objectives periodically vetted and reviewed by experts in the field. This is an ongoing practice through TACF's collaborations with academic researchers and government partners, as well as through formal, in-person Science Reviews which thoroughly analyze research strategies and methods. Science Reviews have been performed in 1999, 2006 and 2018.

What efforts are underway with the WV chapter?

The WV chapter has more than 100 chestnut plantings across the state. Most were planted with hybrid chestnut trees, while some orchards are pure American chestnuts (germplasm conservation orchards) to be used in TACF's breeding program.



Chestnut stump in Tennessee.