

Students help restore a once-proud Indiana tree: www.heraldtimesonline.com

By Carroll Ritter
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The American chestnut blight changed everything. Once a magnificent tree proliferating over a large expanse of eastern forests and extending westward to Indiana, this proud species was all but eliminated over most of its range. Uses included building lumber, flooring, furniture and nut production for food stocks used by both humans and animals.

But the blight introduced from Asia in the early 1900s quickly spread throughout its range and destroyed most all chestnuts. Only remnant isolated pockets exist today in a few locations in North America.

To conduct research and try to reintroduce resistant strains of chestnut to American forests, the American Chestnut Foundation began studies in 1983. Several universities were also working on backcross breeding using resistant Chinese chestnut and native American chestnut. Work has progressed significantly and a seventh generation backcross consists of approximately 97 percent pure American and 3 percent Chinese. Studies will be conducted on long-term growth and survival as research continues.

Purdue University is also leading the way in Indiana ,and the Indiana Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation is very actively working with plantings across the state in the native range.

Sycamore Land Trust environmental educator Carroll Ritter had been following this work and believed that a planting could be done on one of the school outdoor labs at Salem. Putting together a research planting along with design of a 16-acre prairie, a wetland restoration, and hardwood planting would make this a spectacular project. Contacting Dr. Michael Saunders at Purdue led to forming a team of foresters and research people to implement this plan.

Salem school superintendent Lynn Reed, board members and teachers were all supporters. With the help of Ben Finegan from the Indiana Chapter and Jim McKenna at Purdue, 90 trees were obtained for the initial research plot. Seventeen students, faculty and advisers planted on April 13. All participants were excited to see their work, with one high school senior student commenting, "This project enabled me to give something back to my school." Long-term study by students will continue and they will be in charge of tracking growth and survival. This project gives hope for survival of a species and shows how committed students will indeed be able to make the world a better place.

Carroll Ritter is environmental education coordinator for Sycamore Land Trust.

Students at Salem High School measure as they plant American chestnut trees around the high school grounds.
Carroll Ritter | Courtesy photo

