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Going paper free to save trees Northeast Utilities to donate \$5 per customer who opts for e-mail reports

By Robert Miller
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At the start of the 20th century, the American chestnut tree towered over the landscape of eastern North America -- tall, fast-growing, stately trees that dominated the forest.

Their wood, once cut, never rotted. In autumn, the nuts they dropped fed man, birds and beast.

By 1950, a near-fatal fungus from Japan, wiped them out in what's been called one of the greatest ecological disasters to ever hit the continent.

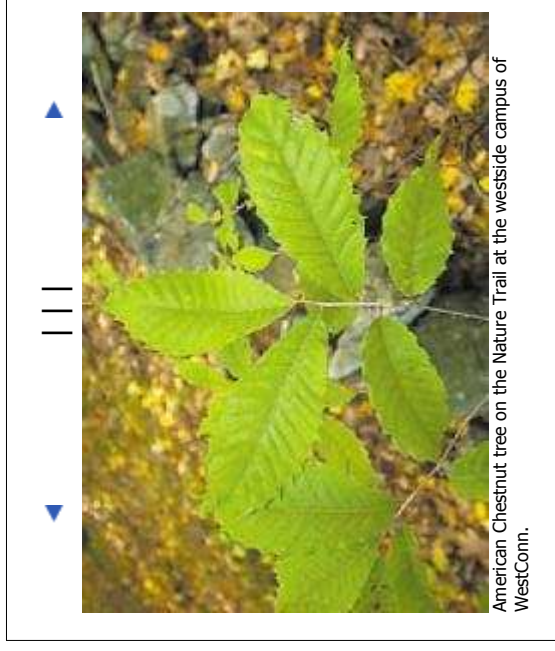
"They made up 25 percent of the forest," said Marshal Case, president of the American Chestnut Foundation in Burlington, Vt. "They could grow to 125 feet. Once they got into the sunlight, they just took off."

Efforts by groups like the foundation, give rise to hope the trees can once again grow in the wild. Anyone who owns even a few shares of Northeast Utilities stock can help.

The utility announced last week it will donate \$5 to the American Chestnut Foundation for every NU shareholder who agrees to receive its annual report and proxy material electronically, rather than by mail.

Because NU has 55,000 shareholders -- about 22,000 in Connecticut -- the program could generate as much as \$275,000 to the foundation.

"It's a great opportunity," Case said.



American Chestnut tree on the Nature Trail at the westside campus of WestConn.

trees with cankers that kill them. It spread fast -- in about 40 years, the dominant tree in the Eastern forests was gone.

"It was a tremendous loss," Case said.

However, the blight doesn't damage the trees' root system. That allows sprouts from a chestnut tree stump to grow, often to 10 or 15 feet, before the blight again sets in and kills it. New sprouts then grow again.

What groups like the American Chestnut Foundation and the agricultural experiment station have tried to do for decades is to find strains of chestnut trees that seem more resistant to the blight's fungus.

They have also cross-bred American chestnut trees to Chinese or Japanese strains -- which are resistant to the fungus -- then crossed these hybrids again with American chestnuts in hopes of eventually creating trees that grow as strong and tall as the old trees but are resistant to the blight.

"We've been able to create 10 lines in Connecticut, which is pretty good for a few years' work," he said.

Anagnostakis said the experiment station now has Japanese-American hybrid chestnut trees that grow straight, are fairly drought-resistant, and bloom late to prevent frost damage. The station also has developed a virus that weakens the fungus.

What it hopes to do, she said, is find American chestnuts in the wild that have plenty of sun and water, and spray them with the virus.

"These trees grow up all messy and blighty, but they get to be 35 feet tall and they flower," she said.

It will then plant the Japanese hybrids nearby, allowing the two strains to crossbreed in the wild.

Learn more

€¢ To learn about the work of the American Chestnut Foundation, go to its Web site at www.acf.org.€¢ The state chapter of the foundation has its own Web site at www.ctacf.org.€¢ If you own Northeast Utilities stock and wish to benefit the American Chestnut Foundation by receiving NU annual reports electronically, you can do so by going to the Web site www.proxyconsent.com/nu.