

ThorpeWood's Hybrid American Chestnut Orchard Growing Strong!

- By Robert Strasser, Maryland Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, Science Chair

A new generation of chestnuts was planted recently in ThorpeWood's chestnut orchard. A group of students from Hood College's biology department spent three hours on the sunny afternoon of April 2nd putting them into the ground. This planting is a first for the Maryland Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation, and represents another milestone for ThorpeWood: It was the first orchard of its kind in the state when it was founded in 1999, and is the only one to date to plant this new generation of chestnut.

Amid the stumps of recently removed trees, ninety advanced hybrids of American and Chinese chestnut are being grown from seed. This is a field trial of what might just be the final generation in a 30 year breeding program that is proposed by the American Chestnut Foundation to be a solution to blight susceptibility in our native trees. These B3F3 nuts came from two unique research orchards in Virginia and Pennsylvania, and will grow along side the remaining larger trees planted 6-8 years ago. Here, in the presence of the introduced blight disease that they have been systematically selected to resist, we will be able to find out just how successfully the Chestnut Foundation's efforts have been.

We are glad to have had such a lasting and mutually successful partnership that includes many educational successes as well as having been a leading site for making the controlled pollinations. This field breeding work incorporates native Maryland American chestnuts into a breeding program that now includes over a dozen sites in the state, four of which have progeny that came from ThorpeWood.

ThorpeWood has distinguished itself as one of the best orchards in the backcross breeding program. The soils in this site are ideal for the growth of chestnuts without regular applications of fertilizer, and the surrounding forests of Catoctin Mountain once supported a thriving and extensive population of this ecologically and economically valuable tree. For this reason we expect that the new trees will do well here, and hope they will grow to fulfill their potential as once and future great trees of North America's Eastern Forests.