

Delmarvelous Farms Chestnuts

Delmarvelous Farms' chestnuts are a successful crop for Pettits. Couple striving to change chestnut's stigma, repopulate country with nut crop.

By Kimberly Button

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Delmarvelous chestnuts are thought to be some of the best in the country.

Most of us know that chestnuts can be roasted on an open fire, thanks to the opening lyrics of the classic holiday tune, "The Christmas Song."

But after the holidays, chestnuts seem to be forgotten along with the fruitcake, eggnog and fuzzy socks from Aunt Ida.

One farm in Townsend, Del., is hoping to change the chestnut's stigma and teach America that chestnuts are not only a delectable treat, but they can be enjoyed throughout the year. Gary and Nancy Pettitt probably thought they would be spending their retirement years moving at a leisurely pace with little stress and a light work load.

Instead of slowing down, though, this innovative couple has taken on an entirely new career path with the hopes of rejuvenating a plant species that has nearly been forgotten in the United States.

As owners of Delmarvelous Chestnuts, the Pettitts have made it their mission to change the American consumer's misconceptions of chestnuts as well as to repopulate the country with this fascinating, nut-bearing tree.

To appreciate the significance of the Pettitt's work in the chestnut industry, one must first understand the monumental ecological event that took place in the early 1900s that altered the way chestnuts were perceived.

History of the Chestnut Tree

Prior to the 20th century, American chestnut trees were among the tallest and most plentiful trees in the forests of the eastern United States.

Gary and Nancy Pettitt have taken an entirely new career path--chestnut farming--in their retirement years with the hopes of rejuvenating this nut tree in the United States.

The mission of Delmarvelous Farms' owners is to change the American consumer's misconception of chestnuts as well as to repopulate the country with this tree.

The harvester/sweeper has a special burr-removal mechanism. When the Europeans first arrived in North America, one-quarter of the trees were American chestnuts.

These massive specimens were commonly over 100 feet tall, with trunks up to seven feet in diameter; they were a necessary food source not only for humans, but also for the wildlife that populated the forests.

Chestnut trees were also used to build houses, furniture and fences. At the turn of the 20th century, a devastating ecological event occurred. Around 1900, a fungus was introduced to America on imported Asian nursery stock that resulted in a chestnut blight.

From 1904 to the 1940s, the blight destroyed 3.5 billion American chestnut trees.

"It was the biggest ecological disaster of that century, at least from a tree point of view," Nancy Pettitt says. "Before the blight, it was said that a squirrel could get on a chestnut tree in Maine and not get down again until Florida."

According to the American Chestnut Cooperators' Foundation, "no comparable devastation of a species exists in recorded

history.”

With an astounding number of trees suddenly killed in the forests, wildlife diminished because of the lack of food. Farmers and residents of the areas also suffered, with no saleable crops or readily available food source during winter. Chestnuts were quickly forgotten as other food staples were introduced.

The Petitt's Family Tradition

Not everyone was willing to give up on the hope of chestnuts repopulating the forests, though.

“My husband's father had a theory that the reason there wasn't any small game in the woods was because there wasn't any food for them,” Petitt says.

Since Gary was a child, his father had worked diligently to reintroduce chestnuts to the forest. He worked with the U.S. Forest Service and the Boy Scouts to figure out how to grow the chestnut population. His father's solution was to introduce Chinese chestnuts, which are resistant to the chestnut blight now found throughout the East, into the woods around his home in northwestern Pennsylvania, creating a viable food source for the wildlife.

Gary's father's award-winning work started to repopulate the forests and made an indelible impact on Gary.

When the couple retired from their corporate jobs, Gary's family background in chestnuts soon started to influence their future plans. Looking for something to do, they thought of buying a small piece of property in Delaware with an eye toward working with chestnuts as Gary's father had.

In a twist of fate, the Petitts were vacationing in Florida a year later when they read a magazine article about Chestnut Hill Nursery (now named Chestnut Hill Tree Farm) in Alachua, Fla., and its work to blend American and Chinese chestnut trees.

Chestnut Organizations

American Chestnut Foundation
(802) 447-0110

American Chestnut Cooperator's Foundation

Chestnut Growers of America
(360) 887-3669

Northern Nut Growers Association, Inc.

Pennsylvania Nut Growers Association
(717) 244-1834

The Petitts were close to the farm and stopped by, where they were generously introduced to much of the research that was taking place in Chestnut Hill Nursery's effort to re-establish the chestnut industry.

The blending of the American chestnut, prized for its sweet taste though no longer easily found in the Eastern United States, and the blight-resistant Chinese chestnut, with its easy-to-peel skin, was just what the Petitts were searching for.

“We were actually looking for a nut that was commercially viable, while Gary's dad was just looking for trees that would grow in the forest for the wildlife,” says Petitt.

They bought 500 trees from Chestnut Hill Nursery in 1993 and continued to add more than 1,000 trees over the next two years to their 16 acres of land in Delaware.

This unique combination of two distinct types of chestnuts would prove to be the Petitt's claim to fame. [MORE>>](#)

For more information about Delmarvelous Chestnuts, visit www.buychestnuts.com For the full history of the American Chestnut blight, read "Saving the American Chestnut Tree."

This article first appeared in the September/October issue of Hobby Farms magazine. Pick up a copy at your local bookstore or tack and feed store or buy one online.