



Winkel Chestnut Farm

Newsletter

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If you seek a promising chestnut industry, look about you

There are many perfectly legitimate reasons to plant trees. At one end of the spectrum is the desire to replicate the diversity of nature. Every tree is an unique individual. Each adds to the rich variety that weaves nature's tapestry. A thousand seeds from a chestnut tree will produce a thousand unique individual trees.

At the other end of the spectrum is the desire to produce a highly productive orchard. Here if we follow the model of other productive farming we find something approaching a monoculture. Highly productive trees are replicated into highly productive groupings of identical trees, or of a combination of productive trees; a managed orchard!

But, where do we find these highly productive trees?

Try what works

Find and test varieties. Some might work well for you. There are select varieties of chestnut trees to be found at nurseries, even in the United States. Trials are being conducted in several locations to find the promising and productive trees for the local situation. Or make your purchases, plant, and conduct your own trial. Find your own "best variety". The same tree might not thrive everywhere in all conditions.

Or, find what works

A second approach to finding that right tree is outlined in Reference 1. To greatly simplify the situation, it works like this. The seeds of even the most superior trees produce seedlings with a great deal of variety in their characteristics. If 2000 seeds are planted from choice parent trees some promising trees will be found in the resulting selection. If 10,000 seeds are planted from the same parent trees then some *very* promising trees will be found. One, or several of those trees, will have truly superior characteristics.

Shall we rush right out to plant 10,000 chestnut seeds? No need. Here in Michigan in the early 1990's there was a good deal of interest in planting seedling

Chinese chestnut orchards. How many trees were planted? Planted on a 20 ft x 20 ft spacing there will be just over 100 trees per acre. 100 acres would contain 10,000 trees. Were 100 acres planted in Michigan in the 1990's? Probably.

The message here is... the 10,000 tree experiment has already been done. It was started over 15 years ago. And what do we find? We find a bit of everything. A certain number of trees have died out over time. Others have suffered from the local weather. And every time you approach a grower with a thousand, or several thousand trees, you find there are a few favorites. Tree size, tree shape, nut characteristics; the tree you seek begins to appear out of the crowd.

If you can define the tree(s) you seek there is a very good chance that tree is out there waiting to be found! The beginning of an orchard, or an industry, is there like gold hiding in a stream.

No, the Michigan experience is not unique. When the population rushed to California in search of gold their chestnut seed went along. Later when the loss of the American Chestnut was imminent the first steps at starting a chestnut industry was undertaken in several areas of the country. Was the 10,000 tree experiment conducted in each location? Probably. Are the great trees out there waiting to be identified? Possibly.

So, just where is the beginning of a chestnut industry? Like gold, it is where you find it. If you seek a great chestnut that grow in your location and in your weather, you could do worse than to look closely in your own neighborhood!

Reference 1:

Rutter, P.A. 1987. Chestnut ecology and the developing orcharding industry. Pages 33-51 in: Chestnuts and Creating a Commercial Chestnut Industry: Proceedings of the 2nd Pacific Northwest Chestnut Congress, August 22-23, Corvallis, OR. M.S. Burnett & R.D. Wallace (Eds.). Portland, OR: The Chestnut Growers Exchange.

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