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A Look at the American Chestnut

Bill Meyer
Winona State University

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A Look at the American Chestnut

Bill Meyer, 2010, Senior Groundskeeper (Retired)



Spring was a little slow in revealing herself this year, but eventually the Magnolias, Redbuds and Crabapples displayed their expressive flowers. I hope you had a chance to view the spring colors on the WSU campus. Now as we begin to soak in the warmer temperatures of summer, we look at trees a bit differently than in the spring. Instead of the dazzling display of flowers, we witness the cooling effects of the tree. The big large tree on the south side of the house or on the south side of a classroom at WSU offers relief on a steamy hot day. The big leaves filter out much of the intensity of the sun and allow us to sit under the tree, drinking our favorite beverage.

So, what trees might be of special interest during the months of summer? Let's look at one tree that has some unusual and intriguing features, the American Chestnut. This once dominant tree was a symbol of early America where it was found throughout eastern America. The total number of American Chestnuts in the early 1900's was estimated to be over 3 billion. Pretty impressive. Unfortunately, the Chestnut blight was introduced to the United States in 1904 and within 20 years virtually all Chestnuts were destroyed.

Today, only a few pockets of the American Chestnut can be found in the U.S. One such stand is located at the farm of Phil Lunde just east of Trempealeau, WI. Nearly 100 year old Chestnuts can be found in a large grove at the Lunde farm. Forest researchers come from all over the U.S. trying to determine why these trees have survived. Other smaller groves and single Chestnut trees can be found occasionally in our area. Our very own legendary WSU retired baseball coach Gary Grob has an American Chestnut or two.

WSU has one American Chestnut that originally came from a seedling gathered at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum. Several stops later, the tree arrived at WSU where it is showcased near the west entrance to the Wellness Center. WSU's American Chestnut blooms in midsummer, usually by the 1st of July. Look for long, white catkin flowers to drape the tree, giving the impression that sparklers are hanging from the tree.



In the fall, these flowers turn to a spiny husk that hold 2- 3 nuts. If you can beat the squirrels to the nuts, you can have a tasty treat and maybe even roast them over a fire. Be careful when you pick up these spiny husks. Remember it has prickly burs that protect the fruit.

If you have a special tree on campus that you would like me to discuss in a future Newsletter, let me know. I can be reached at wmeyer@winona.edu.