January 2024 OMPHS Chestnut Program Update

Summary

Our initial plans discussed in October and November have been dramatically revised due to conditions far beyond our control. This program update provides OMPHS members a chronological understanding of those events and their impact on our program and plans.

ACF Response in October

Throughout the summer and fall of 2023, the American Chestnut Foundation had promised to provide a quid pro quo number of hybrid chestnuts for the 41 nuts we had provided to them from the Ostlund and Sobkowski trees. It was our belief that receiving these "best of the best" hybrid nuts would allow us to crossbreed these nuts and our own nuts from the Ostlund and Sobkowski trees and get the highest quality offspring possible.

On October 27, the ACF informed us that they would not provide us with any hybrid nuts and that the only nuts we would get would be via the annual allotment of native nuts provided to all members. A protest was filed with the ACF but received no satisfaction.

November 6 Call with Joe Resch

Having no success with the ACF, dialogue was held with Joe Resch the author of the American Chestnut Field Guide for 75 minutes. Joe provided insight into the inner workings of the ACF. More importantly, he offered alternatives for obtaining hybrid nuts from the president of the Indiana ACF chapter president if desired as well as alternate resources beyond the ACF.

December 8 ACF Announces Discontinuation of Darling 58 Hybrid Support

In a blockbuster announcement, the ACF issued a press release announcing its discontinuation of support for the Darling 58 genetically modified hybrid. The root cause was poorly controlled science at the very beginning of the process that allowed the Darling 58 origin trees to be intermixed with a second version, the Darling 54. This only came to light over successive generations as the trees showed a combination of lower than expected blight resistance, lower nut production and smaller stature that would make them ineffective in reforestation settings. As one might expect this has caused a great deal of recrimination in the "chestnut community" and a schism between the ACF and the NY chapter and university branch involved in the research. The ACF still is holding fast to its three pronged strategy of hybrids, GMO's and long lived tree nuts providing the long term solution but this has set the process back a number of years.

December Research and Reading

Trying to determine a path forward led to reading "The American Chestnut - An Environmental History" by Donald Edward Davis in December. This book reinforced the idea that climate change has made northern Michigan part of the chestnut tree's natural range and that the cold winters make it difficult for chestnut blight to take hold here. It also introduced the American Chestnut Collaborators Foundation(ACCF), a group that is focused on restoring the chestnut tree without the aid of hybrids or genetic modification.

American Chestnut Collaborator Foundation outreach

Contact was made with Ed Greenwell, the president of the ACCF. He was very encouraging and while the group is not membership driven operates through the sharing of best practices and newsletters. Ed offered several tangible suggestions for planting our current nuts specifically without incorporating any hybrid nuts in our seedling nursery for this year and offered low pressure guidance. He was much more accessible than any ACF representative encountered.

Other Potential Collaborations

Society members Connie Sargeant, Ken and Judy Weaver have brought forward additional collaborator partners that require research and contact. These contacts will be made during the month of January to determine the degree to which we can learn from them and rely on them for local guidance and support. Additionally, discussions will be held with Archangel the ancient tree revivalists Ken Weaver suggested at the October meeting in March.

Current Plan as of January for planting

Given the confusion over hybrids and genetically modified trees as well as the continued favorable conditions being reported in general for control of chestnut blight due to the colder northern Michigan climate; the current recommendation to the Society is to plant only our Ostlund and Sobkowski nuts in up to five locations in hopes of eventually getting more high quality nuts. Pending approvals, the five locations are:

1) Between Jerry Ostlund's tree and the Dougherty House's Reiser1 tree plant seedlings that could grow into saplings without being transplanted.
2) Pending approval from the property owner, in an intelligent configuration around the Sobkowski tree so that the seedlings can grow into saplings not requiring transplanting. These would also aid in the pollination of neighboring trees on the Dougherty House property.
3) Create a small grove on a patch of land identified by Nikki Sobkowski near her house.These trees would be planted to enable future cross pollination of each other and additional native nut stocks.
4) Any residual nuts can be hosted in nursery space being donated by Marty and Anita Klein and Tom and Martha Dalluge for this year. Space in future years remains to be determined.

NOTE: Discussions with Ed Greenwell from the ACCF suggested that nurseries for seedlings be kept at least one mile from any known hybrid or non-native chestnut tree to reduce the risk of cross contamination by non native pollen.

Current Needs

We currently have 41 native nuts being stratified in Georgia. They will return to Old Mission in late February. These nuts can be started indoors in early March. We are looking for volunteers to help with the indoor planting in early March. Stay tuned for a list of some of the potential soil amendments that will be needed.

The biggest thing to do right now is save old fashioned paper half gallon milk, oat or almond milk containers that you may have. Each nut will require its own half gallon

container. If members can bring those containers to the March 7 OMPHS meeting we should have enough if we start now.