

Chestnut Ridge

With the holiday season upon us, it's common to hear of chestnuts roasting on an open fire. However, there is much more to the chestnut than a Christmas carol. In October, we visited Chestnut Ridge, just outside Atlas, Illinois in Pike County.

Chestnut Ridge is a family farm that was started by Dale and Linda Black just over a decade ago. The farm started with a hundred chestnut trees and now boasts almost 3,000 chestnut trees on a hundred acres.



Illinois Rural Electric Cooperative

P.O. Box 80, Two South Main Street
Winchester, Illinois 62694

www.e-co-op.com
1-800-468-4732

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Above: Paul Turner, Tom Harris, Edna Turner, and Verna Harris lend a helping hand packaging the chestnuts in one pound containers.

Right: One to four chestnuts may be found in prickly bur.



The chestnut that Dale and Linda have planted is not the typical imported chestnut you find in your local grocery store. In the early 1900s, a chestnut blight caused mass extinction to the American Chestnut tree. Therefore, most of the chestnuts found in the United States today are imported from overseas. Dale and Linda's chestnuts are different. Their chestnuts are planted from a seed that is fifteen-sixteenths of the original American Chestnut.

Dale and Linda first started their farm by hand planting one hundred American chestnut trees that were around one and a half to two years old. The following year they hand planted 3,000 trees from the seed spread out over a hundred acres. The farm is partially protected by a high fence in order to keep deer out. Deer and other animals like to consume chestnuts and can cause extensive damage to the trees.

When chestnuts fall from the tree, they are found in a bur that is very prickly and should be handled with gloves. Depending on the size of the bur, one to four chestnuts may be found inside. Harvesting chestnuts occurs in the fall. This year's harvest lasted exactly one month for the Blacks, September 15th to October 15th. As the trees grow, so does the amount of chestnuts. Last year Dale and Linda harvested just over 4,000 pounds of chestnuts. However, this year with more ideal weather conditions throughout the year, 8,000 pounds of American Chestnuts were harvested.

Once harvested, the burs are put into a machine that opens them up. The empty burs are then put into a compost pile where they will break down into rich, fertile soil. The chestnuts are disinfected and dried. Next, they are sorted by three different sizes. The machine that opens the burs as well as the machine that sorts the chestnuts was designed and built by Dale. The sorting machine has 3,842 hand drilled holes of three different sizes for the chestnuts to fall through.

Finally the chestnuts are put into bags and refrigerated to ensure freshness. The Blacks sell their chestnuts locally, online, and are available at Hy-Vee grocery stores throughout the Midwest.

When it comes to eating chestnuts, there are many ways to prepare them. A regular chestnut may be eaten by simply cracking it open or by roasting. Other ways of eating chestnuts include recipes for meals such as cream of chestnut soup and cheesy chestnut potatoes.

This past June, Chestnut Growers of America held their annual meeting in Atlas on the Blacks' farm. A small group of growers from throughout the United States attended.

For more information on Chestnut Ridge and recipes for chestnuts or to purchase Dale and Linda's American Chestnuts, visit www.chestnutridgeofpikecounty.com.



Pictured above is Eric Lakin, Illinois Rural Electric Cooperative Board Member; Alan Heaton, Former Illinois Rural Electric Board Member and Chairman of the Murrayville Economic Development Committee; Darrel Davenport, Treasurer of the Murrayville – Woodson Elementary School PTO; Steve Lakin, Mayor of Murrayville; Jennifer Dukes, Principal of Murrayville –Woodson Elementary School; Brad Wilson, Treasurer of the Murrayville Economic Development Committee, and Kelly Pool, a member of the Murrayville-Woodson Elementary School PTO and Murrayville Economic Development Committee .

Members' Fund Donates to Murrayville-Woodson Elementary School

Illinois Rural Electric Cooperative's Members' Fund recently donated \$2400, along with \$1000 from the Murrayville Economic Development Committee to the Murrayville-Woodson Elementary School. The money will be used to purchase document cameras for use in each classroom by the teachers and students. The cameras project an image of the documents onto the promethean boards that are in each classroom. The cameras will allow teachers to easily display any text or image.

The donation from the Illinois Rural Electric Members' Fund was made possible by participating members paying an even dollar amount on their monthly electric bill. Since March 2000, the Members' Fund has distributed over \$359,600 to local schools, hospitals, churches, service clubs, and local charities.



Holiday Safety Tips

Keep Your Family Safe This Holiday Season

The holidays are a great time for decorating, but as you string the lights and put up the tree, you need to be careful. Here are some simple steps that everyone can do to ensure a safe and happy holiday season.

- Don't overload your electric circuits. Check fuses or circuit breaker panels to see what your home can handle, and stay well within the limits.
- Watch for flickering lights, sparks from appliances or wall outlets, warm plates, plugs, or outlets, and dimming lights or television screens.
- Do not connect more than three light strings sets together. Light strings with screw-in bulbs should have no more than 50 bulbs connected together.
- Make sure there's a bulb in each socket. If a bulb is burned out, leave it until you have a replacement.

- Carefully inspect each decoration before plugging into an outlet. Cracked, frayed, loose or bare wires, and loose connections may cause a serious electric shock or start a fire. Replace damaged items immediately.
- Always unplug an electrical decoration before replacing the light bulbs or fuses.
- Surge protector strips are a safe option if you need more outlets.
- Turn off all electrical decorations before leaving home or going to bed.
- When placing your tree, make sure it is kept away from sources of heat, like fireplaces or heat vents, and out of the way of household traffic.

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