



# Wilton Land Trust

Dedicated to Preserving Wilton's Open Spaces

Summer 2023

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Wilton Land Trust Intern

Wilton High School Senior Project:

American chestnut Orchard Manager

## My WHS senior internship as an American chestnut tree orchard manager at the WLT

The chirping of crickets echo through the tall, luscious meadow. *Celithemis eponina*, a halloween pennant dragonfly, skims the air with its wings, weaving through the grass. *Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis*, eastern garter snake, dashes between patches of meadow plants as I lug the blue *Lowes* bucket towards the green, wired cages. Cool water splashes over the bucket's rim as I give the American Chestnut trees a much-needed drink. It's another hot summer day at Chestnut Meadows, home to the sixty American Chestnut tree orchard.

In 2020, the Wilton Land Trust (WLT) bought the 13.5-acre property, soon to be named Chestnut Meadows, with help from the Save 183 Campaign and investors George and Carol Bauer. A year later, the WLT began reconstructing the Daniel Offutt Barn, which will serve as a base hub for the WLT and include an energy-efficient heating and cooling system. The property also consists of the American Chestnut tree orchard, planted by the Wilton Community and organized in partnership with The American Chestnut Foundation.

The American chestnut is a deciduous tree, commonly found in eastern North America. It is part of the beech tree family. The tree has many different uses, ranging from edible fruit to the usage of wood products. The tree produces edible nuts and small flowers that carry a lot of pollen. The edible nuts, chestnuts, can be roasted or eaten raw. Chestnuts are popular during the Christmas season. Native Americans often used chestnuts to cure coughs and heart and skin conditions. Farmers also used the chestnuts to feed their livestock. The trees are also popular for their wood and bark. Wood products, like furniture made from chestnut trees, were quite popular in America.

Sadly, the species has declined rapidly. According to the IUCN, American chestnuts are critically endangered. In the 19th century, Japanese Chestnut trees that were infected with Asian bark fungus were brought over to America. These infected trees soon gave way to a chestnut blight that killed most of the American tree species. The American chestnuts were further hit by the ink disease, which came from Cork Oak trees brought from Portugal.



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In 1983, the American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) was founded by a group of prominent plant scientists and laypersons who recognized the severe impact of the demise of the American chestnut tree. TACF's mission is to return the iconic American chestnut to its native range by developing blight-resistant American Chestnuts through breeding and scientific research. They partner with organizations and municipalities to plant germplasm conservation orchards (GCO) of American chestnut trees to breed blight-resistant trees.

In 2020, the WLT partnered with the ACF to plan and establish a GCO at its Chestnut Meadows Nature Preserve. In 2021, the WLT established its GCO. Since then, the orchard has grown from ten to sixty American chestnut trees in two years. This was accomplished with the help of WLT's mighty volunteers, TACF, local officials, board members, students, interns, and the passionate Wilton community that participated in the American chestnut tree planting segment of WLT's Stewardship Sunday Program: a community volunteer workday program that engages the Wilton community to steward WLT preserves and trails.

As a senior at Wilton High School, I utilized my four-week senior internship project at the WLT. This meant spending more time with the organization that I deeply respect. Through my senior internship, I took on the role of managing the American chestnut orchard at Chestnut Meadows. I watered the trees every three to four days using the water pump, hose, and bucket at the property. I was weeding the cages and mowing the grass when I wasn't watering. This ranged from hand-weeding the cages and around the cages to using a weed whacker to mowing around and in between cages. It was immensely enlightening to watch and observe the trees grow. I was first introduced to the chestnuts through the 2022 planting, and since then, I have been able to see all the hard work and care from the volunteers, interns, and board members come to fruition.

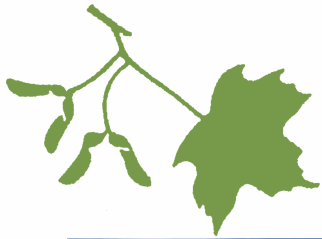
It was a lot of hard work caring for the sixty plantings, especially during the summer days, but the responsibility placed upon me has been one of the most enriching experiences in my high school years. It taught me the importance of communicating with my team members, managers, and directors. It taught me the importance of repetitive hard work and the results that come from it. It taught me the importance of caring for and nurturing live organisms. But most of all, it taught me the importance of protecting endangered wildlife and ecosystems. I've always been passionate about the natural world around me as my best memories and experiences are often recalled outdoors. But as we are beginning to understand how dire our climate crisis is, from experiencing intense heat waves and wildfires to flooding and violent storms, efforts from organizations like the Wilton Land Trust are even more of paramount importance. I'm forever grateful for the opportunity to manage the orchard, for many, if not any, high schoolers can say that they have managed an American chestnut tree orchard; and I can take away from the experience, the knowledge that I'm helping contribute to a more sustainable Earth.



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