

Chestnuts roasting by a Norfolk County fire ...

A vision to see chestnuts consumed in Ontario to be grown locally led to a venture that is going on 30 years.



Dolf Wynia

Ontario residents consume about 9 million pounds of chestnuts annually, most of which are imported from China and Italy.

Dolf Wynia, the former head of the St. Williams Forestry Station, started looking at chestnuts through his job when alternatives were being sought to tobacco.

“We had quite a bit of interest and we had a few farm-

ers interested but they weren't prepared for the length of time it takes to get to a crop,” he said.

Basically, it takes eight years to get a chestnut crop of any size. There was some thinking at the time some of the fruit farmers might have been interested as they are used to a longer period of time to see a first crop.

“There is a native chestnut tree,” Wynia said. “The native trees have almost died out because of a disease that

came in from China. That led eventually to the establishment of the Canadian Chestnut Council which is trying to bring it back into our forests.”

The native tree is much smaller than the Chinese variety.

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Wynia's research led to him planting 2.5 acres of chestnuts on his property. He purchased these from a nursery in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

With chestnuts, it takes three years for production if the new trees are grafted stock. If the trees were grown through natural pollination, it can take six to seven years for production.

In Ontario, there is one major producer near Strathroy. That means equipment to harvest and process chestnuts isn't readily available, even if it was economical for Wynia's small operation. He ended up using a shop vacuum with a long hose and generator pulled in a wagon behind an ATV as a way to pick up the chestnuts from the ground.

The trees can be shaken to get the nuts off, but Wynia said this usually isn't necessary. He tries not to leave them on the ground more than a couple of days.

Then, chestnuts need to be graded by size and disinfected in hydrogen peroxide in case there are any contaminants. If the chestnuts are to be kept any length of time, refrigeration is necessary or they will start to grow.

Normally chestnuts are either roasted or boiled for consumption. They must be peeled first. Wynia explained chestnuts have three skins – an outer bur and a shell and then an inner skin which often sticks to the meat, but if it's heated up it will come off.

“Usually they will drop out of the covers,” he said. “They are very prickly. Some of the varieties, they don't drop out and the bur stays while on the ground.”

When Wynia got his first crop many years ago, his next challenge was marketing.

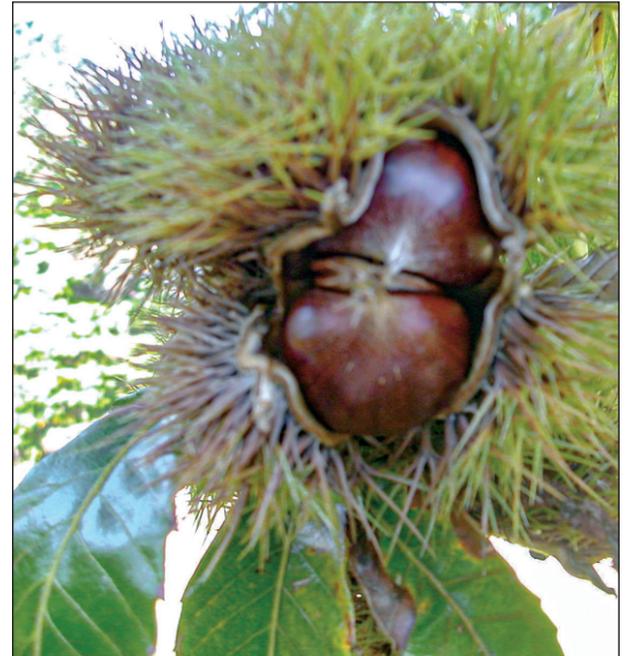
“I tried to market them locally, but I found there weren't enough people familiar with them,” he said.

Eventually, he struck a deal with a buyer who has stalls at several different markets in the city.

The crop has been relatively pest free – until this year. Chestnut weevils were always present in the native chestnuts.

“Because the native chestnuts disappeared, the weevil pretty well disappeared. I never had a problem with weevils until this year and they came back with a vengeance in my plantation.”

As a result, he lost a large percentage of his crop. Wynia's 2018



Chestnuts harvested and graded

crop was 1,000 pounds of chestnuts, but this year the weevils, combined with a bad pollination year due to a wet spring, reduced his crop to 100 pounds.

Chestnut trees are larger than normal fruit trees – usually about 25 feet high and 10 inches in diameter. The size makes it difficult to spray on this small of a scale as specialized equipment is needed.

Wynia is not sure where his chestnut crop is going but is still hopeful a larger percentage of the “chestnuts roasting by an open fire” in Ontario can be domestically produced in the future.



Shop Vac harvesting system