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Allegheny Chinquapin

by John Maloch, HCMGA Intern

One of my fondest memories involving the Allegheny Chinquapin is riding on an old yellow school bus as it bounced through the countryside on cool autumn afternoons. After school, my friend James and I, at the time being held against our will in separate third grade classes, would rush to see who could sit further back in the bus for the trip home.

The winner of that race, entirely determined by which teacher was most anxious to be rid of her class for the day, would gain the tactical advantage in the game soon to begin - hurling Chinquapin nuts into the back of the head of the one stuck sitting further forward in the bus. The bus driver, Mr. Derrick, not being a fan of pointy-burred objects flung about with great abandon, was a constant obstacle in the effective execution of this activity.

The Chinquapin tree was once widely distributed along the Appalachian mountain range south to Florida and west to East Texas. However, the Chestnut blight, caused by the fungi *Cryphonectria parasitica*, also impacted the various types of Chinquapin trees.

In the 1950's the Allegheny Chinquapin (*Castanea pumila* var. *pumila*), a relative of the American Chestnut (*Castanea dentata*), still grew across portions of East Texas. But, by this time, nut-bearing specimens of the tree were becoming rare due to the spreading blight.

While people a generation older would tell of stands of large trees, we could only find smaller, widely spaced specimens in the forests, always growing on a sandy hill. The exact location of these surviving trees, generally gleaned from fathers and grandfathers, were held in great secrecy among my group of friends.

The Chestnut blight was first noticed along the east coast of the United States and was first documented in a specimen residing in the New York Zoological Garden in 1904. Its source is commonly traced to the introduction of Japanese nursery stock, which had become popular imports.

This blight, spreading by normal environmental means, was most likely accelerated due to the introduction of the new mail order business. Within 40 years the American Chestnut population, consisting of nearly four billion trees and including the Allegheny and Ozark Chinquapin, was essentially wiped out.

Eastern Henderson County provides optimum conditions for the Allegheny Chinquapin as it grows in mixed hardwood forests of pine and oak, generally preferring well-drained, acidic soils on high ridges or slopes. Growing at altitudes from sea level to elevations of 1200 meters, it can tolerate hot, dry conditions but not salt spray or dense shade. Growth with a forested environment can be accelerated as fire opens up the area since the tree can readily regrow from rootstock.

The Allegheny Chinquapin grows as a multi-stem shrub or tree up to 50 feet tall and is stoloniferous or non-stoloniferous. The twigs and limbs are hairy and turn shiny brown with age. Its leaves are alternate, simple, and short-stemmed, with pointed teeth along the sides.

A monoecious plant, the yellow or white male flowers usually appear in May and June while the female flowers appear later in the season. The fruit is a spiny burr holding a single nut that matures in autumn and early winter. Chinquapin nuts, sweet and easily cracked, attract a variety of wildlife and deer browse on its foliage.

Once common in East Texas, it is quite possible that specimens still exist in the area. If you know of an existing specimen or would like to pass along a story about Chinquapins, please contact the number below.

For more information, call 903-675-6130, email hendersonCMGA@gmail.com or visit www.henderson-co-tx-mg.org.