

Chestnut

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American Chestnut Leaf Sculpture seen from aerial drone image. Photo by Frank Sauer.

American Chestnut Leaf Sculpture

A COLLABORATION WITH
FRIENDS OF PRINCETON OPEN SPACE

By Susan Hoenig, Eco-Artist

On May 13, 2020, ArcheWild, a landscape restoration firm, planted eight 100% native American chestnut trees for Friends of Princeton Open Space in its 18-acre forest restoration project at the Billy Johnson Mountain Lakes Nature Preserve in Princeton, New Jersey. The trees, which were six feet tall when planted, are third-generation blight-resistant specimens raised from orchard-grown seed. The eight chestnuts planted at Mountain Lakes were placed within the eight-foot enclosure fence that protects them from deer browse.

On the other side of the fence from the chestnuts, I created a leaf sculpture on the forest floor, using river stone to simulate the leaves of the American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*). The five leaves are oblong lanceolate with coarsely serrated

edges, one leaf blade per stalk. The leaf at the apex goes beyond the fence. Volunteers assisted in gathering large, pointed stone to compose a 'breaking wave' pattern characteristic of this species of chestnut.

The design of the American Chestnut Leaf Sculpture is based on a watercolor painting I created to imagine how the leaves would be situated. On site, I cleared the invasive plants, then laid out sticks and branches to demarcate the five leaves with straight, lateral veins. A hard-working crew helped transport stone from the Belle Meade co-op to the site. The American Chestnut Leaf Sculpture was assembled, drawing attention to the beauty of the restoration project.

The prototype for my collaboration with Friends of Princeton Open Space began in 2016. For many years, I walked the trails of the Bunker Hill



Environmental Center at Graeber Woods Preserve in Franklin Township, New Jersey. I love to observe wildlife and envisioned how an art project could draw attention to the importance of native trees. I created eleven "Ecological Leaf Sculptures" situated beneath the trees they represent, outlined with local river stone, basalt, glacial boulder, diabase, goose egg stone and shale. Red oak, bigtooth aspen, American beech, black birch, tulip poplar, shagbark hickory, red maple, sassafras, flowering dogwood, Liberty elm, and black walnut leaf sculptures, eight to thirty-five feet in diameter, are interwoven within the understory of the forest,

alongside 96 acres of trails that meander through forest, meadow, stream and marsh. Please view photos on my website: www.susanhoenig.com

I lead walking tours of the leaf sculptures at Graeber Woods and Mountain Lakes Preserve for students, professionals, and people who have never set foot in the forest to see the relationship between themselves and the environment that sustains them. Along the trail, each leaf sculpture is a focus, to learn about what goes on within the habitat of each sculpture and the surrounding area. This experience raises firsthand awareness of forest ecology and a deeper

understanding and appreciation of nature. As a result, the comprehension of habitat loss, climate change, and ecosystem degradation is not just an abstract thought, but becomes a lived experience.

At Mountain Lakes Preserve the restoration of the American chestnut is a reminder that there is hope and renewal for the natural world. My ambition is to arouse awareness, and to re-envision ecological relationships and new possibilities for co-existence and sustainability. We must think in terms of connectivity; the trees benefit us but how can we benefit the trees?

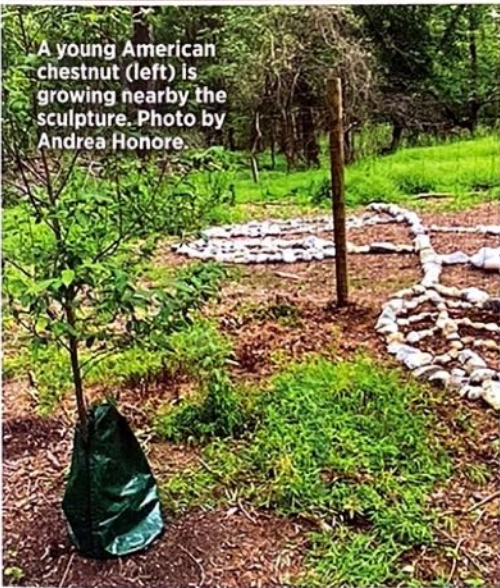
Watch this brief seven-minute documentary about the creation process of this collaborative project:

http://bit.ly/chestnut_leaf_sculpture

Susan Hoenig stands by her sculpture as she poses for this photo taken from a drone. Photo by Frank Sauer.



A young American chestnut (left) is growing nearby the sculpture. Photo by Andrea Honore.



BIO: Susan Hoenig connects earth and art to make visible the relationship between habitat, plant, and animal life. She studies the evolutionary impact of the forest understory and leads walking tours of her ecological leaf sculptures. Susan makes black walnut ink during mast years, collecting nuts, seeds, and acorns to print in forest compositions. Since 2006, Susan has worked at the Featherbed Lane Bird Banding Station in the Sourland Mountains of New Jersey. This experience has greatly inspired her to learn about what a healthy habitat means for the forest ecosystem.