

# Michigan

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# Chestnut comeback

By JENNIFER VINCENT

ONCE in a while opportunity comes knocking, but with most new startup ventures, you need to be the one taking the initiative. That's exactly what Michigan State University is doing in an attempt to bring yet another new commercial crop to Michigan's extremely diverse agricultural industry — chestnuts.

Nat King Cole's 1946 production of "The Christmas Song," which begins with the popular "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire," is familiar to many, but few have tasted the sweet and savory flavor of chestnuts or know their numerous food uses.

MSU professor Dennis Fulbright is part of a group at the university called "Team Chestnut" that is working with a number of growers to establish more chestnut orchards, increase yields by finding productive varieties for Michigan's climate and use the proper horticulture care to make them flourish. The team is also tackling harvest, storage and marketing challenges and opportunities to advance the industry on all fronts.

### Locally grown

Most of the chestnuts found in stores during the holiday season are imported from Europe, where the industry continues to flourish. The problem is that many of those imported nuts are what's left over after local demand is met and are of questionable quality, Fulbright says. "And by the time they make it to

### Key Points

- A team has been established to advance the chestnut industry in Michigan.
- Healthy and gluten-free, chestnuts can be used in many recipes.
- A grower cooperative was formed in '01 to market Michigan-grown chestnuts.

the states, the perishable crop is highly susceptible to rot."

By creating a local, high-quality, plentiful supply, Team Chestnut is hoping to attract the interest of retailers and end users, including consumers, restaurants and eventually food processors.

"Chestnuts are not like pecans or walnuts; it's more than a garnish," Fulbright says. "It can be the basis for many foods because it can be processed into a gluten-free flour, which is a healthy alternative for people suffering from celiac disease and others who must follow a restricted diet."

Chestnuts also are low-fat and cholesterol-free, contain vitamins A and C, and are a source of high-quality protein and trace minerals.

Though edible chestnuts are staples in European and Asian diets, they have only recently been reintroduced to the North American culinary scene after American chestnut trees were wiped out by blight in the early 20th century.

"More Michigan producers are getting into the business of growing edible chestnuts, thanks in large part to help received from researchers here at MSU and from Chestnut Growers Inc., a grower-cooperative formed in 2001 to



**GREAT POTENTIAL:** Dennis Fulbright, MSU plant pathology professor, is working with growers to create a commercial chestnut industry in Michigan. Research is ongoing to select good varieties for the state's climate and to create new markets.

market Michigan-grown chestnuts," explains Fulbright.

"There is no cookie-cutter recipe for growers to follow in establishing a chestnut orchard," he adds. "It's not an

exact science, but research is ongoing, and both consumer and grower interest is expanding."

■ Read more on chestnuts, Pages 4-5.

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