JG-TC [Journal Gazette & Times-Courier](http://jg-tc.com/), 700 Broadway Avenue E, Suite 9A. Mattoon, IL

**Students are tending hazelnut, chestnut orchard in Casey**



MAY 08, 2015 2:30 PM  •  [ROB STROUD JG-TC STAFF WRITER](http://jg-tc.com/search/?l=50&sd=desc&s=start_time&f=html&byline=ROB%20STROUD%0AJG-TC%20Staff%20Writer)

CASEY -- Some of the hazelnuts that are mixed into chocolate spread or the chestnuts that are roasted over open fires may someday be grown commercially in Central Illinois.

Those tending to a test orchard in Casey are helping assess the potential of different hazelnut and chestnut varieties to serve as sustainable alternative crops within this region.

The orchard was planted in fall 2013 through a collaboration between Eastern Illinois University plant ecologist Scott Meiners and the Casey-Westfield agriculture education program. The approximately 1-acre orchard is located at the school district's bus garage, 2458 Cumberland Road, Casey.

Meiners, whose wife is Casey-Westfield elementary school Principal Melissa Meiners, said hazelnut and chestnut trees can thrive on steep, highly erodible land that is not well suited for corn and soybean row crops.

"Nut crops, with their lower nutrient requirements and greater ability to stabilize soils appear to be ideal for these areas," Meiners wrote in his project description. "Nut crops also provide the potential to convert low profit croplands into crops with higher economic returns."

Meiners said he and his graduate and undergrad students have been evaluating the growth of the trees at the grant-funded orchard. He said their findings and experience hopefully will be of use to farmers and other property owners who are interested in planting alternative crops on their land.

"If people want to start growing them, we will have a local knowledge base here," Meiners said.

In addition, Meiners said the test orchard is reaching out to the next generation of farmers by offering educational opportunities and work experience for Casey-Westfield agriculture teacher Bryan Bennett's students.

The orchard began with $13,980 in "seed money" from the EIU President’s Research Fund. The project has since received a $7,496 grant from the Council on Faculty Research and a $16,500 grant from the Illinois Department of Agriculture, plus a $2,000 NC-SARE education grant awarded to Casey-Westfield.

Meiners said the Lumpkin Family Foundation recently awarded a $22,000 to help him build four additional hazelnut and chestnut orchards with local school districts.

"This is a nice way to collaborate with local communities and impact a lot more people," Meiners said.

Some of the hazelnut trees at the Casey-Westfield orchard flowered for the first time in early spring and are on track to produce a small crop of hazelnuts in the fall, Meiners said. He also has planted a small number of these trees at his home in rural Casey.

Meiners said hazelnuts have become widely popular in the U.S. market as ingredients in candy and spreads, and also yield oil that can be used for cooking and even bio-fuels. He said most U.S. hazelnuts are grown in Oregon.

Chestnuts are slowly being reintroduced by U.S. orchards after native varieties were decimated decades ago by an imported blight, Meiners said. Chestnuts are low in fat and have a starchy texture "like a tree potato," he said. Some of their uses include being ground into flour or roasted as snacks, he said.

"We have already seen the potential for alternative crops through the establishment of several wineries in Central Illinois, much farther north than had been previously found in the state," Meiners wrote in his project description. "The development of several wineries within the region, as well as a few fruit orchards, provides the potential for coordinated agro-tourism and sales outlets for locally-produced nuts."