Local farm secures grant for native mulberry forest

MILLFIELD-- Millfield is now home to Ohio’s first mulberry orchard and research site. With the help from a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Grant, Solid Ground Farm Director Weston Lombard is planting what he hopes will be the beginning of a new trend in Appalachian agriculture.

The soft, delicious fruit that stains the hands of foragers both young and old looks like a long slender blackberry and grows by the bucket full in backyards across the country. After years of experimenting with all manner of fruit, Lombard noticed that the wild mulberries on his farm were consistently the best producers and the most enjoyed fruits by his Rising Appalachian Warriors summer camp participants. Trusting their instincts, Lombard decided to go native, expanding his orchard to include both red mulberry, a species native to this region, and white mulberry, which has been naturalized.

With funding from SARE, Lombard explored the region both in person and online, looking for the best backyard mulberry trees. Using social media and with the help of generous fruit enthusiasts, he collected cuttings from over fifty varieties of mulberry, including some from Wisconsin, Illinois, and North Dakota. This spring, Lombard and a small crew of local volunteers grafted the cuttings onto nursery stock, essentially cloning the trees with the best fruit.

Now, these varieties, along with a dozen cultivated varieties purchased from nurseries around the country, will join other native fruit trees at Solid Ground Farm. This orchard, or mulberry forest, will act as a proving ground to show which varieties perform the best in this region’s climate. Those that produce in the first two years and bear large amounts of quality berries will be further propagated and made available to the public for further experimentation.

Lombard said he sees great promise in the mulberry as it is virtually pest and disease free, grows in poor soils, makes a crop every year, produces early, and is very sweet and delicious. Mulberry wood is also excellent firewood, makes strong fence posts, and grows extremely fast. The leaves of the naturalized white mulberry are edible and nutritious for people and livestock. Plus, after the initial planting, the soil in the orchard doesn’t need to be disturbed again. The roots of the mulberry, combined with a permanent ground cover of grasses and forbs, will prevent the nutrient-rich soil from eroding and help regenerate the landscape.

“In contrast to traditional ploughing and cultivating that leaves sloping land unprotected and prone to fast erosion, a mulberry orchard holds the soil in place and encourages an accumulation of organic material and topsoil over time” Lombard said.

For information and to see the orchard’s progress, visit [www.solidgroundfarm.com](http://www.solidgroundfarm.com), or search for Solid Ground Farm on Facebook.