

Rivercane transplanting under way

By Mike Kesselring
Macon County News
March 17, 2011

Volunteers are still being sought to help relocate rivercane from the Western Carolina University area to a site near the new Cherokee School, on Big Cove Road, as part of the university's Rivercane Restoration Project.

Rivercane was once plentiful on floodplains and along stream banks in Western North Carolina. It is a mainstay of Cherokee culture and traditionally has been used in making baskets, blowguns, mats, other crafts and for utilitarian purposes. The plant has been used by Cherokee artisans for millennia and is an important part of Cherokee culture.

Volunteer work to relocate rivercane began Friday, March 11. The first day of transplanting attracted more than 20 volunteers, from eighth graders and college students to a few adults. The group successfully relocated 40-45 culms (stems), including the underground rhizomes (roots) from Coleman Smith's property in Cullowhee to the Cherokee School rivercane site.

"The long-term goal of this project is to restore native bamboo and establish a patch of rivercane on Cherokee tribal land that can be used for educational purposes and for harvesting by Cherokee artisans," said Adam Griffith, staff member in WCU's Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines.

"We still have five more days scheduled for transplanting. On March 19 and April 1, 2, 8, and 9, volunteers can pitch in to move more plants from locations near WCU to a patch of ground at the new Cherokee Central School," Griffith added.

The project is a collaboration between WCU and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. WCU and Griffith have been spearheading the rivercane project for six years. The Cherokee Preservation Foundation is funding the project through their Revitalization of Traditional Cherokee Artisan Resources (RTCAR) grants.

"Rivercane is one of only three species of bamboo native to the United States. It is pretty aggressive, but randomly produces seeds. We are transplanting the plant because rivercane seeds don't stay viable for very long. Viable seeds are rare. Rivercane creates a dense network of tough underground stems and roots. It is the underground system that is important for starting new shoots," said Griffith.

Besides needing volunteers for transplanting, the project is also seeking land owners who are willing to donate rivercane growing on their property. "Often times, property owners destroy it. We are not encouraging the destruction of rivercane since it provides important stream bank stabilization and wildlife habitat," Griffith said.

An area Griffith is particularly interested in is Otto. A plentiful amount of rivercane grows on private land in the valley along Hwy. 441. To help identify these sites, landowners who want to donate bamboo for transplant are asked to go to www.rivercane.wcu.edu and click on “Donate Rivercane,” or, if anyone wants rivercane planted on their property click “Request Rivercane.”

“You can put a dot on the map where rivercane can be donated or if you want rivercane planted on your property. Be sure to include your contact information so we get in touch with you,” says Griffith.

Anyone interested in volunteering to help with the rivercane project can find out more on the same website by clicking “Help Transplant Rivercane” or by e-mailing Griffith at agriffith@wcu.edu.

The five remaining transplant dates volunteers can choose from are Saturday, March 19, Friday and Saturday, April 1 and 2 and Friday and Saturday, April 8 and 9.

The schedule for each day:

- 9:30 am: Meet in the parking lot of the Fine and Performing Arts Center.
- 10 a.m. - noon: Harvest rivercane in the Cullowhee area, wrap in plastic, and load onto trailer.
- 12 noon: Break for lunch.
- 12:30 p.m.: Drive to Cherokee.
- 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.: Plant rivercane on the campus of Cherokee Central Schools.
- 4 or 4:30pm: Arrive back at campus.

Volunteers are asked to bring a lunch. A cooler to keep lunches cool will be available and drinking water will be provided. Appropriate footwear is sneakers or boots. The work will be done in light rain, but not heavier rain.

To contact project director Adam Griffith call (828)227.2728 or email him at: agriffith@wcu.edu. Related websites include: www.rivercane.wcu.edu; www.balloonmapping.wcu.edu; and www.coastalcare.org.