

The Akwesasne Mohawks, the State University of New York – College of Environmental Science and Forestry Ranger School, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Collaborate to Plant Black Ash Seedlings

A tree planting project, on May 4th, 2009, was the culmination of many years of cooperative efforts between the Akwesasne Mohawks, the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry Ranger School in Wanakena, New York, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Saratoga Tree Nursery and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Region 6 Forestry staff. An Adopt-a-Natural Resource Stewardship Program Agreement has been in place between the Akwesasne Mohawks and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, in which the Mohawks have adopted several black ash sites on state forest lands in St. Lawrence County. This ongoing agreement is designed to implement silvicultural activities aimed at perpetuating and propagating black ash. Additionally, in 2007 the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe received funding through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's [Tribal Wildlife Grants](#) program to parallel this effort by continuing its partnership for hardwood wetlands habitat restoration and management.



Richard David keeps an eye on the planting activities.

Because of its special qualities, black ash is the tree of choice for Northeast Native Americans, including the Akwesasne Mohawks, for producing splint basketry. Black ash growth rings are easily separated by pounding with the back of an axe; the splints produced are flexible when moistened and become very strong once woven into a basket and dried. Mohawks produce baskets both for utilitarian purposes and as art. Many people are familiar with the pack baskets crafted with sturdy, tightly woven black ash splints that are used by hunters and trappers. Collectors prize the “sweet grass” basket that makes use of finer, more delicate splints (some brightly dyed) interwoven with braids of an aromatic grass.

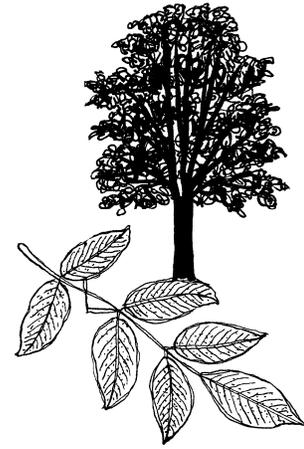


State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry Ranger School students (foreground) and Mohawk crew (background) at work planting.

From a cultural standpoint, black ash provides a foundation for the cultural identity of the Akwesasne Mohawks through unique designs in artful expression, such as the “strawberry basket,” which is woven into the shape of a strawberry, another important cultural plant. In addition to cultural expression, families and community are literally woven together, with traditions passed on through story telling and interaction while log gathering, log pounding, splint cleaning and basket making.



Black ash is a swamp hardwood species which often grows on sites that are seasonally flooded and usually are very wet. It is typically not noted as a valuable commercial specie, since harvest by mechanized logging equipment is usually impossible due to the wet site conditions where it grows. Portions of New York State Forest lands are located in close proximity to the Akwesasne Mohawk Reserve. Some of these lands support populations of black ash. Not every black ash tree can produce basket material; it is a rare tree that has the quality to be a “basket tree.” In order to produce good splints, the tree must be a very high quality specimen, one with a perfectly straight bole free of branches and any defect. It must also have evenly spaced, consistent width growth rings. Good basket trees are hard to find.



Given the fact that black ash occur on New York State Forest lands, the stewardship agreement was originated in hopes of working with that resource to produce more black ash, and more high quality basket trees. Over the years, the partners have set up study plots, completed several different silvicultural thinnings, and identified and inventoried many stands of black ash on state forest lands. Dr. Michael Bridgen of the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry Ranger School and his classes of students have assisted with the inventory and thinning on plots. Mohawk Forest Technician Patrick Kelly and his crew have accomplished the thinning work on many of the sites. The partnership is breaking new ground, as little is known or published concerning the silviculture associated with improving black ash.



The planting that took place on May 4th complimented work done years earlier by Les Benedict and Richard David, two Mohawk men who have devoted themselves to all aspects of black ash culture and basketry. They have collected black ash seed for many years, with ladders, tarps, pruning poles and high rubber boots in swamps ranging from Akwesasne to Manitoba, Canada.

Dr. Michael Bridgen (left), State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry Ranger School and his students (center) and Mohawk crew (right) at work planting.



The seed that they have collected was sent to the Saratoga Tree Nursery for planting to produce seedlings. The nursery has a long term commitment with the Akwesasne Mohawks and currently holds a 10-year supply of reserve seeds. This work with the Akwesasne Mohawks is but one of many special projects that the nursery routinely tackles, in addition to producing the millions of seedlings that are planted yearly throughout New York State. The nursery, for example, also produces select seedlings from state champion big trees and historic trees. The black ash project highlights part of the unique mission of the Saratoga Nursery, which deserves recognition for its accomplishments beyond the more routine nursery tasks it also performs.



State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry Ranger School's Dr. Bridgen (left) and Mohawk crew (center and right).

It is no simple matter to produce black ash seedlings from seed. Prior to this effort, no attempt had ever been made to grow large numbers of nursery stock black ash seedlings. Black ash has some curious survival adaptations; it does not typically germinate all at the same time. A portion of the seeds may germinate in the first year, and some may take up to four years to germinate. Through trial and error, the nursery staff over time reached a methodology to routinely produce the healthy, viable seedlings that were recently planted on the Glenmeal State Forest near the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry Ranger School.



Mohawk crew installing tree tubes.

The planting on May 4th was accomplished with an enthusiastic crew comprising Les Benedict, Richard David, the Mohawk Forestry crew under the direction of Forest Technician Patrick Kelly, the Ranger School class of 2009 under the direction of Dr. Michael Bridgen, and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Forester Tim Baxter, along with the loving companionship of a bumper crop of hungry, biting black flies. All involved worked shoulder to shoulder, in black muck that often became knee deep. At day's end, all of the seedlings were planted and staked with protective tree tubes. These black ash trees will stand as an example of what cooperation can accomplish. Many thanks go out to all of the parties involved.



