AgroSpectrum ASIA
Envisaging Future | Updating Present

The Savanna Institute launches Tree Crop Improvement ProgramÂ

15 June 2023 | News

$12.7 millionÂ in grants will fund tree crop breeding to improve varieties for Midwestern farmers who want to diversify their operations with perennial crops

$12.7 millionÂ in grants will fund tree crop breeding to improve varieties for Midwestern farmers who want to diversify their operations with perennial crops

The Savanna Institute, the Grantham Environmental Trust, and the Matthew Zell Family Foundation announced the launch of a Tree Crop Improvement Program to develop varieties of key nut, fruit, and timber crops for farmers and markets. TheÂ $12.7 millionÂ in grant funding supports the first three years of an expansion in Savanna Institute's efforts to equip farmers with the resilient, productive tree crops needed to increase the number of farms practising agroforestry, which is the integration of trees, crops, and livestock in regenerative systems.

"We're working to make tree crops more climate resilient and market viable for farmers who want to adopt agroforestry," saidÂ Keefe Keeley, Executive Director of the Savanna Institute, a nonprofit based inÂ WisconsinÂ andÂ Illinois. "Our partnership with these visionary foundations begins to level the playing field for farmers who want to grow tree crops for the betterment of their farms, of our communities, and of the climate."Â

The funding allows the Savanna Institute to establish one-of-a-kind breeding populations for key nut, fruit and timber crops, and apply cutting-edge plant breeding techniques to develop improved varieties. Seven perennial crops were selected based on their ecological resilience, economic viability, and scalability for US markets: chestnuts, hazelnuts, elderberry, black currants, black locust, persimmon, and mulberry.

Chestnuts and hazelnuts are high-value nut crops with a growing demand that outstrips the current domestic supply. Elderberry and black currants are nutritious small fruit crops that mature relatively quickly compared to other perennial crops, allowing for faster returns on investment. Black locust, persimmon, and mulberry are all trees that grow calorie-dense livestock fodder, making them ideal for silvopasture systems, which are animal pastures that incorporate trees.

Farmers use agroforestry to diversify their operations in multiple ways: planting trees and shrubs along field edges as windbreaks, integrating trees in managed pastures for forage, or planting trees in widely spaced rows between alleys of

annual crops, which allows farms to benefit from both annual and perennial crop production. The Savanna Institute and its funders anticipate that improved tree crop genetics will increase the adoption of these types of beneficial agroforestry practices, which scientists consistently rank among the most viable and efficient climate solutions available in the US. Learn more about agroforestry atÂ www.savannainstitute.org.

"Agroforestry systems have major untapped potential to not only sequester significant amounts of carbon, but also provide numerous other climate, food security, and conservation benefits to our agricultural systems. We are excited to support Savanna Institute's leadership in agroforestry as they boost the possibilities for tree crops," said Maki Tazawa, Program Officer for the Grantham Foundation.