A tree used in traditional medicine in China will be grown in Louisiana as part of an effort to develop a new treatment for cancer, researchers announced Wednesday.

Camptothecins, compounds obtained from the tree, offer hope of being an effective treatment, he said, but he cautioned against unwarranted expectations.

"We don't want someone coming out here and saying this is a magic bullet," he said.

A group of researchers and forest product corporations has planted 1,000 of the trees at three sites in Louisiana and one each in Arkansas and Georgia, said Dr. G.H. Weaver, director of School of Forestry at the University of Louisiana Tech in Ruston.

The group will plant up to 6,000 more trees next spring, he said.

The Tree of Joy, also known as Camptotheca acuminate, grows more rapidly than the Pacific yew tree, another tree valued for its potential for treating cancer, said Dr. Stanley Carpenter, director of the LSU Agriculture Center's School of Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries.

Efforts to harvest the Pacific yew's bark, the primary part of the tree that contains the chemical taxol, have been frustrated by the slow-growing conifer may be wiped out in some forests of the Northwest.

By contrast, the camptothecins, the derivatives of the Tree of Joy that are believed to have the cancer-fighting powers, are in various parts of the trees, Carpenter said.

Raising the possibility that the trees could be trimmed or harvested in a variety of manners, possibly boosting the state's economy, Carpenter said.

Camptothecins have been studied in Japan, England, and to a lesser extent, the United States.

Early clinical trials suggest that the compounds are effective against lymphoma, sarcoma, and cancers of the colon, lung, breast, ovary, uterus, stomach, pancreas and prostate, said Dr. Moerschbaecher, head of the department of pharmacology and experimental therapeutics at LSU Medical Center in New Orleans.

In addition, compounds related to camptothecins have been found to prevent growth of viruses, suggesting the compounds might be useful in fighting AIDS, Moerschbaecher said.

There is also evidence that camptothecins produce less severe side effects than taxol, which is used in the treatment of cancers of the breast, ovary and lungs, he said.

The project is the brainchild of Tracy Moore, a consultant to the forest products industry, who was diagnosed in September 1991 with prostate cancer.

Moore and other members of the group, who unveiled the project at a news conference in New Orleans, said they were pleased that the tree is being grown as part of an effort to develop a new treatment for cancer, and learned about the Tree of Joy.

He soon located 70,000 seeds and began forming the group to bring the tree to Louisiana.

Moore, who believes treatment has now left his prostate cancer in remission, said he hopes the Tree of Joy will lead to "a new chemotherapy that would not have the severe side effects that taxol does."

Moore and other members of the group, who unveiled the project at a news conference in New Orleans, said they were pleased that the tree offers the prospect of simultaneously improving the health and the economy of Louisiana.

Moerschbaecher said the LSU Medical Center could eventually screen camptothecins in clinical trials, but where any trials are conducted depends on which drug companies seek to produce a drug based on the compound.

Georgia-Pacific Corp. is growing the Tree of Joy in southern Arkansas, and International Paper Co. is growing the tree in Georgia, Dr. Weaver said.

In addition, Carpenter said several drug companies are interested in arrangements for development of the tree, but declined to name any of the companies.

"We're just in the negotiation stage right now," he said.