

The American Chestnut Story

by the New York State Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation

Editor's Note: Hanford Mills Museum has eight American chestnut trees that were planted on the museum site in the 1980s. We hope to protect them as they grow so they can be used to help the American Chestnut Foundation's programs.

The American chestnut was once one of the most important trees in our eastern hardwood forests. It ranged from Maine to Georgia, and west to the prairies of Indiana and Illinois. It grew mixed with other species, often making up 25 percent of the forest. In the Appalachian Mountains, the ridges were often pure chestnut. In early summer, when the trees were covered with their long, creamy flowers, the mountains looked as if their crests were covered with snow. In the virgin forests, where large chestnuts were commonplace, mature trees could be 600 years old, and average 4 to 5 feet in diameter and 80 to 100 feet tall. Many specimens 8 to 10 feet in diameter were recorded, and there were rumors of trees bigger still.

The nuts were acknowledged to be the finest-flavored of all chestnuts. Railroad cars full were shipped to the big cities for the holidays, where street vendors sold them fresh-roasted, and they were essential to the traditional stuffings for roast goose and turkey. Unlike other nut trees, the chestnuts usually

produced heavy crops every year, and the nuts were a major cash crop for many families in Appalachia. Wildlife depended extensively on the nuts, too - bear, deer, wild

tant as redwood. It was used for virtually everything - telegraph poles, railroad ties, heavy construction, shingles, paneling, fine furniture, musical instruments, even pulp and plywood. The chestnut was also the country's major source of tannin for tanning leather.

The American chestnut proved, however, tragically susceptible to the deadly chestnut blight, imported early in the century on Oriental chestnut trees planted in New York City. The blight rampaged through the forests, spreading 20 to 50 miles per year, killing virtually every chestnut in its path. It was many times more destructive than the Dutch elm disease. By 1950, the American chestnut was essentially eliminated as a forest tree. Since the root system is unaffected by the blight, some survive, mostly as shrubs, where giants once stood. There is no significant wild reproduction.

Recent developments in genetics and plant pathology promise new hope that this magnificent tree will again become part of our natural heritage.

To make this promise a reality, a group of prominent scientists established the American Chestnut Foundation (ACF) in 1983, and a group of interested persons incorporated the New York State Chapter (ACFNY) in 1991. Both are non-profit organizations. They have only one goal - to put the American



American Chestnut twig, leaf, and nut burr.

turkey, squirrels (of course), and once, the huge flocks of Passenger Pigeons - all waxed fat for the winter in the chestnut forests.

The tree was also one of the best for timber. It grew straight and tall, often branch-free for 50 feet. Loggers tell of loading entire railroad cars with boards cut from just one tree. Straight-grained, lighter in weight than oak and more easily worked, it was as rot-resis-

chestnut, king of the Eastern forests, back on its throne.

The ACF advocates a multiple attack on the fungus, encouraging research in biological control and actively breeding trees for disease resistance. Norman Borlaug, Nobel Prize winning plant breeder and ACF Board member, is confident the breeding effort will succeed.

In addition, the ACFNY is sponsoring genetic engineering research at SUNY's Syracuse Forestry facility as an

alternate research approach. So far the desired gene has been identified and plans developed for insertion into the cell of an American chestnut.

Paralleling the research effort, there is another necessary program to preserve and expand the American chestnut gene pool for future breeding with the research-developed blight-resistant tree. The New York State Chapter has established 17 "seed orchards" on dedicated

land for that purpose. And this program is expanding each year as members plant more trees.

If you would like more information about the American Chestnut Foundation please write them at P.O. Box 4044, Bennington, VT 05201 or you can find them on the internet at www.acf.org.* They will be glad to send you information about the organization and how to become a member.



* The ground mail address and website address are the updated versions. They were valid as of February, 2008.

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