

In Search of a Few Good Chestnuts!

At the turn of the 20th century, the American chestnut dominated our eastern forests in size, numbers, and value. Reaching up to 100-150 feet in height, and with a trunk as wide as 10 feet at maturity, this magnificent tree ranged from Maine to Mississippi and from the Atlantic coast to the Appalachians and Ohio Valley. A reliably productive tree, its nuts were the single most important food source for a wide variety of wildlife from bears to birds. Chestnut wood is straight-grained and easily worked, lightweight and highly rot-resistant, making it ideal for fence posts, railroad ties, barn beams and home construction, as well as for fine furniture and musical instruments. Chestnut lumber industry and nut collection were major sectors of rural economies.

Unfortunately, the chestnut blight, which was imported from Asia, quickly killed virtually all American chestnuts throughout their native range. Today, the only remnants one typically finds of this past giant are the sprouts sent up from old roots still persisting in our woodlands. Occasionally a sprout lives long enough to produce nuts a few years before succumbing to the blight.

The American Chestnut Foundation has been working on a breeding program designed to produce trees that are about 94% American chestnut with just enough genes from the Chinese chestnut to make them resistant to the blight. As part of this process, the Massachusetts Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF), which also serves Rhode Island, is hoping to find several "Mother Trees" to pollinate each year. A mother tree refers to an American chestnut sprout that lives long enough to produce nuts. Each of these trees can contribute valuable genetic diversity to the effort to create a blight-resistant tree population.

Do you have or know the location of an American chestnut tree with the potential to mother a new generation of seedlings? If so, please contact Yvonne Federowicz at yfederowicz@cox.net. The following is a link to the MA TACF website where there is a guide to A. chestnut identification. <http://masschestnut.org/basicTreeID.php>

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