

The American Chestnut

“Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose....” We’re all familiar with this popular holiday song, but have you ever wondered how to roast chestnuts? Or exactly what a chestnut tree looks like? Once, American chestnut, *Castanea dentata*, was a major component of eastern forests from Maine to Michigan and south to Alabama and Mississippi. Called the “Redwood of the East” because of the tremendous size of mature trees, American chestnuts once made up approximately 25% of eastern forests. When chestnuts bloomed in spring, the Appalachian mountains appeared covered in snow. Trainloads of chestnuts were sent to eastern cities to be roasted and sold by street vendors during the holidays. However, the once-majestic American chestnut can now only be found as an under-story shrub in eastern forests. So what happened to this great tree?

It’s one of the greatest tragedies in the history of American forestry. Chestnut canker or blight, *Endothia parasitica*, was the culprit. An Asian fungus to which American chestnut had, and to this day has, little natural resistance. It is likely plant enthusiasts inadvertently brought the fungus into the United States in the early 1900's on imported plants. The disease was first discovered in 1904 killing chestnut trees in New York City. Over the next 50 years, the disease swept through eastern forests destroying native tree stands. Spread by fungal spores, the disease causes branch cankers that girdle and kill the stems. Everything above the canker dies. Often infected trees re-sprout from the base, but the new shoots only live for a few years before they are re-infected. Current research continues work to develop blight resistant American chestnut cultivars.

However, though American chestnuts are not available, nuts from European chestnut, *Castanea sativa*, can still be found in specialty grocery stores. So how do you roast chestnuts? With a sharp knife, make an incision through the smooth outer skin and textured inner skin on the rounded side of each nut. This allows steam to escape and prevents the nuts from bursting during roasting. Roast the nuts over an open fire in a wire popcorn basket or special chestnut roasting pan, shaking periodically, for 15-20 minutes. Allow the nuts to cool slightly before peeling and eating. Chestnuts can also be roasted in the oven after scoring, at 375 degrees for 15-25 minutes. Place them in a shallow pan, and turn them over mid-way through the roasting time.

Travel restrictions, through the United States Department of Agriculture- Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, that prohibit the unregulated introduction of plant materials into the United States from abroad, were developed to safeguard our natural resources from similar situations and, in part, in response to the tragic loss of the American chestnut throughout eastern forests in the United States and Canada.

Note- American chestnut should not be confused with horse-chestnut, a tree found in some Nebraska landscapes. American chestnut, a member of the beech family, is native to the United States and has 1-3 sweet, edible nuts enclosed in a very prickly bur. It has simple, oblong-pointed leaves that alternate up the stems. Horse-chestnut, a member of the buckeye family, was introduced to the United States from Europe. It has palmate leaves made up of 5-7 individual leaflets and an inedible nut enclosed in a spiny, light brown, leathery capsule.