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Chestnut tree numbers dwindling

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Imagine Detroit losing Ford. Imagine Washington losing its monuments. Or imagine, dare we say it, Pittsburgh losing the Steelers.

Imagine that, and then you can begin to understand the magnitude of the loss that has been the disappearance of the American chestnut from Pennsylvania's forests.

Up until the 1950s, the chestnut was the dominant tree in Pennsylvania — it made up 25 percent of the forest — and across the Northeast. They were especially common locally. Chestnuts — which once averaged 5 feet in diameter and up to 100 feet tall — made up 30 percent of Westmoreland County's forests in 1911, according to the state chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation. Only a half dozen counties in the state had more per capita.

Chestnuts made up another 27 percent of the forest in Somerset County, 26 percent in Fayette, 18 in Indiana, and 17 in Armstrong. Even the smaller, scatted woodlots of Beaver and Washington counties were once 10 percent and 9 percent chestnuts, respectively.

Wildlife — including everything from deer and bears to turkeys and squirrels — benefited immensely from its presence. Whereas even the most reliable oaks only sporadically give off a bumper crop of acorns, the chestnut produced mast in abundance every year, scientists say. A single tree could easily produce 10 bushels of chestnuts.

Then, disaster struck. An Asiatic blight fungus imported to this country by accident in the 1800s virtually eliminated the chestnut from the landscape.

Today, while chestnuts continue to sprout, their numbers are down, and those that do survive for a while rarely reach more than 20 feet in height and fail to reach sexual maturity.

There may be cause for hope, however.

Over the last 25 years, scientists have been cross-breeding American chestnuts with more blight-resistant Chinese chestnuts, then back-crossing the hybrids with more American chestnuts to select for desirable form and traits. The hope all along has been

to create a blight-resistant version of the American tree.

That day, some believe, may finally be close at hand.

"We have a six-generation breeding program — we think that will be adequate for both full American character and blight-resistance," said Sara Fitzsimmons, Northern Appalachian regional science coordinator for the American Chestnut Foundation and a research support technologist at Penn State.

Those sixth-generation trees could be — and indeed should be — blight resistant, she said. Researchers can't say that with complete certainty, and testing the trees will take another 10 years.

But some hope to see results even sooner. The state chapter of the Foundation has been working with the Pennsylvania Game Commission, National Wild Turkey Federation, and others to grow fifth-generation American chestnuts in Lancaster County.

"In five years we expect to start harvesting ... highly blight resistant nuts from these trees," said Foundation past president Chandis Klinger.

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