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# Pulling chestnuts out of the urban forest

By Norwalk Tree Alliance

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Have you sighted any American chestnut trees in the Norwalk area or other parts of Connecticut? The Norwalk Tree Alliance and the Connecticut chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation are looking for examples of the tree that once blanketed the Eastern U.S. more profusely than other species and provided prized timber, building materials and food for people and wildlife like white-tail deer, wild turkeys and bears.

A fungus from Asia that infects the bark--first identified in samples from the Bronx Zoo in 1904--virtually decimated the chestnut forests by the 1950s, destroying what foresters estimate at between 3 million and 4 million trees.

Today a European chestnut imported from Italy or Spain is commonly sold by street vendors in urban America and in grocery stores across the country at Christmas time.

In the East only sprouts or young trees have survived, reaching up to eight feet or more in height. They sometimes even flower and yield nuts. But eventually they succumb to the blight and die. Because of the alkaline content of the soil, there are no chestnut stands in the West.

Meanwhile the American Chestnut Foundation and the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in New Haven are committed to resuscitating the American chestnut. They are actively developing blight-resistant trees by back-crossing the U.S. species with disease-resistant Chinese and Japanese trees.



America chestnut leaves, burrs and nuts

After nearly 50 years of botanical experimentation, the hybrids are close to being acceptably advanced to regenerate the species and ultimately become a vital American resource again. It is anticipated that some healthy seedlings could be available and ready to be planted as early as this fall.

At the same time in Norwalk the team of Dan Landau and Jeanne McAndrew are documenting the community's Notable Trees as part of the mission the Norwalk Tree Alliance to preserve the community's urban forest, an estimated 120,000 trees, the majority of them on private property.

Could it be there are survivors somewhere in some obscure location in the Norwalk area or other parts of the state? A mature tree would be an invaluable find for the scientific community.

Renowned for its stateliness and its place in U.S. literature, the American chestnut—or *Castanea dentata* to give the tree its scientific name—reaches 80 feet in height with a three-foot-thick trunk.

They are distinguishable by the leaves, up to 11 inches long and four inches wide. With its hairless twigs and widely spaced saw-teeth on the edges of the leaves—hence the Latin name *dentata* or toothed—the American chestnut is distinct from the reasonably common Chinese chestnut which has hairy twig tips and thick, shiny, leathery leaves that feel fuzzy on the lower surface.

Flowering white in late June and early July, the American chestnut is a prolific bearer of nuts, usually in clusters of three, in a spiny green burr. The nuts develop through the late summer and the green burrs eventually turn brown and then open to release the pods about the time of the first frost.

The nuts are richly textured reddish-brown, sweet and delectable raw or maybe even roasted on an open fire, recalling the opening line from Mel Torme's "The Christmas Song."

Should you sight a tree you think might be a flowering American chestnut survivor, contact the Norwalk Tree Alliance at (203) 847-8182 or online at [www.norwaktreealliance.org](http://www.norwaktreealliance.org).

Note: The American chestnut is separate and unrelated to horse chestnuts or buckeyes, usually planted as street trees. The horse chestnut nuts are poisonous. The tree is identifiable by its palmate, five-part leaves growing opposite each other on twigs,

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compared to the American chestnut's simple leaves positioned alternately on the twig. Horse chestnuts produce upright clusters of pea-like flowers. The wood is spongy and without commercial application.

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[Top of Page](#)



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