

Returning Chestnut Trees to City Where Blight Was First Found

By [ANDY NEWMAN](#)



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times Some blight-resistant chestnuts that will be carefully tended and later planted in Brooklyn.

“All Chestnut Trees Here Are Doomed” read the headline in The New York Times.

The year was 1911, “here” was greater New York, and the great chestnut blight, which was first discovered in the Bronx Zoo in 1904, was well on its way to wiping out four billion of the trees that once made up a quarter of the Northeast’s hardwoods.

Now, blight-resistant American chestnuts, 22 years and six generations in the breeding, are coming to New York City.

In fact, they are already here — 10 nuts, smaller than the chestnut-cart variety, trailing green sprouts and packed in peat moss, sitting in a Ziploc bag in a box on the middle shelf of Bart Chezar’s refrigerator on Garfield Place in Park Slope, Brooklyn, atop a defrosting top-round steak.



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times Bart Chezar with one of the non-blight-resistant chestnuts he helped plant in Prospect Park.

At a ceremony on Thursday in Prospect Park, where more than 1,400 chestnuts were felled by blight in the first decade of the 20th century alone, officials of the [American Chestnut Foundation](#) will present the seeds to the city parks department.

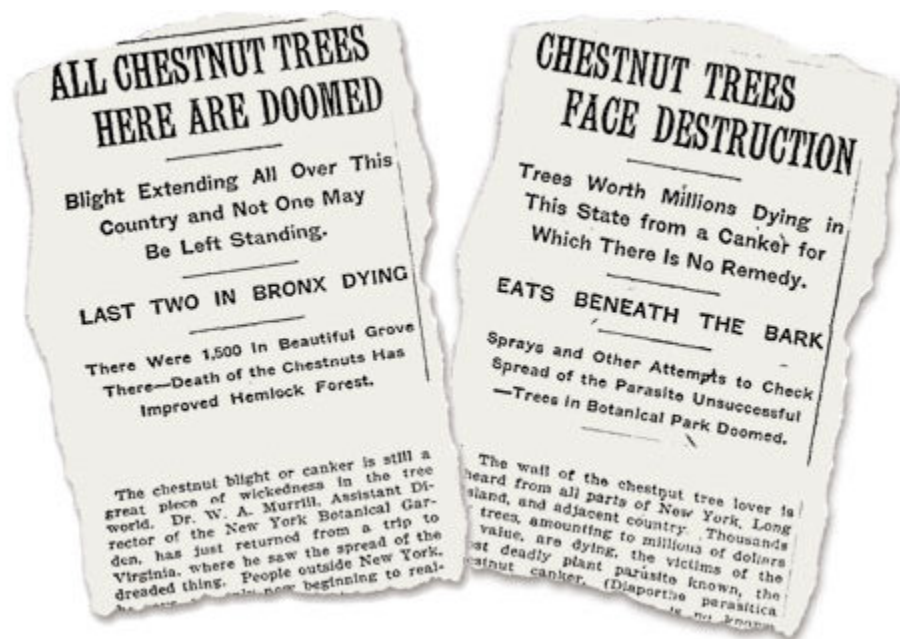
It is just a photo op. The nuts will immediately be whisked off to the department's [Native Plant Center](#) on Staten Island, where they will be tended like the tender babies that they are until this fall or next spring, then planted in Prospect Park and in the Native Flora Garden at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden nearby.

The hope, of course, is to help undo one of the city's, and the nation's, saddest pieces of botanical history.

"It's kind of a circle there," said Mr. Chezar, a retired New York Power Authority engineer, stalwart park volunteer and long-time member of the chestnut foundation. "What's going on tomorrow, and the early history of the trees and the blight."

In the late 19th century, chestnut trees, with their furrowed bark, long toothed leaves and spine-covered fruit, were as familiar and common as oaks. Their ramrod-straight trunks, which often rose for 50 feet before branching, made high-quality timber, and the savory nuts were a major food source for squirrel and human alike.

Then, through multiple ports and Asian trees, came the blight fungus, which first showed as orange pinhead-size growths that split the bark and then girdled the tree, causing death by strangulation.



The spores required only the tiniest wound to gain entry — a snapped branch, a squirrel’s tooth, a nut-gatherer’s knife could do it. By the time the Bronx Zoo’s forester, H. W. Merkel, noticed dying trees in 1904, the pandemic was well under way. In 1906, a mycologist at the New York Botanical Garden nearby, William A. Merrill, identified and classified the fungus and became forever associated with it: *Diaporthe parasitica* Merrill.

“The wail of the chestnut tree lover is heard from all parts of New York, Long Island and adjacent country,” The Times wrote in 1908. “Hundreds of letters are received at the Botanical Garden, containing almost piteous appeals for help from people whose trees are dying.”

No cure could be found. By 1940, American chestnut trees had just about vanished, though sprouts still persist today, and still blight.



American Chestnut Foundation A chestnut tree felled by blight in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the 1920s.

Efforts had already begun, though, to crossbreed American chestnuts with blight-resistant Chinese chestnuts. They were never considered hardy enough to warrant widespread planting, but in 1989, the chestnut foundation began a new project at its research farm in Meadowview, Va. It “backcrossed” the Chinese-American hybrids

with American chestnuts to produce a tree that was more American with each generation but still resistant to blight.

Three years ago, the United States Forest Service began planting the foundation's "Restoration Chestnuts," which are 15/16ths American, in national forests in Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia. The foundation made them available to some of its members in small quantities, which is where Mr. Chezar enters the picture.

In 2004, Mr. Chezar took part in the planting of some purebred American chestnuts in Prospect Park, in anticipation of the eventual availability of the crossbreds. Eight have survived, the tallest of which now stands 35 feet high, in a glen near the Picnic House. One flowered and produced some small nuts last year. But without help, they are most likely doomed.

"They haven't gotten the blight so far, but they probably will in the future," Mr. Chezar, 64, said. The fungus persists, in the soil and on other trees, and will probably find the chestnuts eventually.

He asked the chestnut foundation for some of its blight-resistant nuts, so that they might pollinate the purebreds. "My pitch was that we should have some of these blight-resistant trees in New York City, where people can see them and learn about them and find out why they're important," he said.

Within weeks, his box of nuts had arrived in the mail.

"We're hoping these trees will grow 100 feet tall," said Fred Hebard, the chief scientist for the foundation. "At this point, we're still in the testing phase to see if that hope is realized. I guess we'll find out 60 or 80 years from now."

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