

Chestnut Blight

Cryphonectria parasitica



Chestnut blight killed entire forests.

Courtesy of the Shenandoah National Park Archives



Chestnut blight is characterized by cankers that kill the living layer of bark, cutting off the tree's food and water supply.

AN ACCIDENTALLY IMPORTED DISASTER

Then the chestnut blight struck. First discovered in 1904 in New York's Bronx Zoological Park, the lethal fungus, an Asian organism to which our native trees had very little resistance, spread quickly. It stormed through the forests of the eastern United States at a rate of up to 50 miles a year, leaving in its wake only dead stumps and plummeting wildlife populations. It was considered to be the worst ecological disaster to hit this country in the first half of the 20th Century (the accidental importation of the chestnut blight fungus led to the adoption of the nation's first plant quarantine laws).

By 1950, the keystone species of more than 30 million acres of eastern forests (an area the size of New York) had been essentially eliminated. Millions of acres of dead--but still standing--trees were all that remained.

Chestnut blight is characterized by cankers that kill the living layer of bark, cutting off the tree's food and water supply. Typical cankers on young smooth-barked stems appear yellowish-brown to orange-brown in contrast to the normally greenish-brown bark. Interestingly, the roots are not harmed by the fungus, which accounts for the many small saplings of the tree still found throughout the tree's range. These saplings can often grow 20 to 30 feet in height before succumbing to the blight. Occasionally, a chance tree will escape the blight for longer periods of time and may even flower. Unfortunately, these trees ultimately become infected.

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