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American Chestnut tree: mourning the gentle giant of the Smoky Mountains

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Are you aware there are no American Chestnut trees in the Smoky Mountains? Did you know the Appalachians once contained more than 884,000 acres of American Chestnut? To break those numbers down a bit more, approximately 30 percent of the trees that were once in the Smokies were American Chestnut.

The American Chestnut was once the crowning glory of the Appalachians. All types of wood industries were established in the region because of the American Chestnut. The reddish-brown, lightweight wood was soft, very resistant to decay, it was easy to split and it didn't shrink or warp. The wood from the tree was straight-grained which made it the ideal material to build furniture, cabins, poles, posts, railroad ties, and other wood products. The wood and bark from the tree was also rich in tannin acid. This is why more than half of the tannin used in the leather industry back in the day came from the American Chestnut.

Not only was the wood from the tree economically important, but so was its fruit. In addition to being a food source, chestnuts were an important cash crop to mountain people. One mature tree alone could produce 10-12 bushels of chestnuts. Entire families would rake up chestnuts by the wagon load and sell them in nearby towns. Chestnuts were even put on wagon cars and shipped all over the country. In addition to providing much needed money to mountain folks, the American Chestnut also



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brought the people in the community together for social gatherings.

It wasn't just people who depended on the American Chestnut. Animals depended on the tree, too. The fruit from the tree was a major food. You could say that chestnuts fattened up the wildlife, and in turn, they fattened up the folks. One man reported killing a turkey that had 97 undigested chestnuts still inside. The tree also served as shelter for all forms of wildlife. One mountain man reported finding part of his herd of cattle taking shelter inside a hollowed out American Chestnut during a storm. Yes, they were that large. One man is quoted as saying the trees stood about "*120 feet above the forest floor.*" No doubt about it, the American Chest was impressive in size and some reached up to 20 feet in diameter.

So, just what took down this gentle giant? Believe it or not, it was blight. More specifically, a fungus, *Endothia parasitica*, commonly known as the Chestnut Blight. It was introduced into the United States from the Orient around 1904. This fungus produces two types of spores. One is carried on the wind, the other is dispersed by rain. The American Chestnut didn't stand a chance against this enemy. Once infected a tree would die between 2-10 years.

It's believed the fungus was accidentally introduced to the American Chestnut from Asian Chestnut trees that were imported from Japan into a plant and tree nursery in New York City. It was first noticed at the New York Zoological Garden. Despite control attempts, the fungus spread like wildfire. By the 1920s, the blight was in the Appalachians.

It's interesting to note that unlike some species, the wood of the American Chestnut is durable. After a tree died, instead of deteriorating in months, it could stand for decades. Many people likened the dead, but standing, American Chestnuts in the Appalachians to skeleton ghosts standing guard in the mountains. Because of the wood's durability it could be lumbered for about ten years after the tree's death—but most of the dead trees were infested with small borers that left pin-sized holes into the wood. This wood was known as "wormy chestnut" and was used for small items.

Few people are around today that were alive during the time when the American Chestnut was the crowning glory of the Appalachians. Yet, we do have some pictures and recorded accounts from those who were there. A man from eastern Kentucky remarked on the dead American Chestnuts and said, "*I had the awfulest feeling about that as a child, to look back yonder and see those trees dying, I thought the whole world was going to die.*" His feelings were echoed by many others—including one man who said he and his father would walk through the mountains among the tree skeletons and his dad would remark that "*it looked like the whole mountain was dying.*"

The people that remember the American Chestnut have every right to mourn them. The tree's decimation affected everything about the Appalachians—from home, social, and economic life, to wildlife. The American Chestnut is nothing now but a memory for some, and history to others. While a few stoic large trees may be found today, it's rare. The most you'll probably ever see are sprouts from American Chestnut stumps. The sprouts that do grow rarely make it long enough to even flower. Yet, research continues and it's hoped that one day a cure will be found to eradicate the Chestnut Blight. To learn more about what is being done for the American Chestnut, visit [The American Chestnut Foundation](#).

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