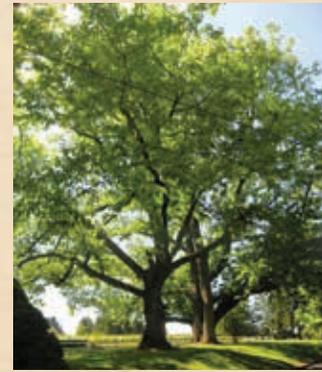


Chestnut

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American Chestnut Trees

IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

By Doug Gillis, Carolinas Chapter President

There are **American chestnut trees** growing in the **Pacific Northwest** that are more than **150 years old**, six feet or more in diameter, and nearly 100 feet tall. When planted near enough to one another so pollination occurs, the trees can produce abundant crops of sweet tasting nuts each fall.

How did the trees, native to eastern woodlands though not to western forests, find their way to Oregon, Washington and northern California? **Pioneers** traveling west along the **Oregon Trail**, some splitting off on to the California Trail, are thought to have **brought the first American chestnut seedlings westward**. Their knowledge of the American chestnut and its importance to pioneers settling in the eastern part of the country may have inspired them to bring seedlings west.



The larger of the two American chestnut trees at Mills and Mills Memorial Park in Tumwater, Washington.
Photo by Lawrence Jacobson.

One wonders if the Conestoga and Prairie Schooner wagons some traveled west in were constructed partly of American chestnut wood, especially the beds, as wagon makers back east knew that American chestnut wood was two-thirds the weight of oak wood, just as strong and rot resistant. Reducing the weight of wagons was important for long distance traveling. Bacon eaten along the trail may have come from hogs fattened on chestnuts in Appalachia. Leather products and clothing essential to pioneers traveling west may have been processed with tannins extracted from American chestnut trees. Cabins back east, built of hand hewn American chestnut logs, may have been the model pioneers traveling west used to fell Redwoods, Douglas Firs, and Western Cedars to provide shelter needed once their trip was completed.

The early travelers who planted American chestnut seedlings could not have imagined that one day the large chestnut trees in the east would be devastated by root rot and chestnut bark blight introduced on Asian plant stock. Nor would they have thought that one day the west coast area would be one of the few locations where large, healthy American chestnut trees would be found.

Fortunately, root rot and chestnut bark blight have not affected west coast American chestnut trees due to efforts to ensure that neither is introduced into California, Oregon or Washington. Shipment of anything chestnut into the three states is prohibited except per strict regulations and only under permit. In addition, and to help further prevent the spread of pests and diseases, TACF has adopted a policy to restrict shipping chestnut materials west of the Mississippi. People visiting American chestnut (as well as European chestnut) trees need to be sure none of their clothing or equipment brought with them from the east has been exposed to root rot or chestnut blight which they could transfer to west coast trees if not careful.

Those of us in the east interested in American chestnut trees want our western friends to keep up their efforts to identify and help preserve American chestnut trees growing in their states. Given the restrictions, anyone buying or selling the trees in the Pacific Northwest should verify that they are pure American chestnuts. How does one know if a chestnut tree is American, European, Asian or a hybrid, all of which have been introduced into western states? Microscopic analyzes of hairs on the back side of chestnut leaves are a positive way to identify different species of chestnut trees sampled.



Doug Gillis standing between two American chestnut trees in Sherwood, OR.



Two American chestnut trees, Portland, OR.

Please visit http://acf.org/find_a_tree.php and click on "Download a Chestnut Identification PowerPoint Presentation" which explains leaf hair analyses. To tell TACF about your tree, submit a leaf sample along with a Tree Locator Form available at the website above. Call the National office at 828-281-0047 if you need assistance.

Some of the oldest known American chestnut trees in the Pacific Northwest are still thriving while some have died of old age or have been damaged by lightning strikes or storms. Examples are:

- Two American chestnut trees are growing in the traffic circle at Mills and Mills Memorial Garden in Tumwater, Washington. It is reported that Jesse Ferguson, part of the Simmons Party that traveled west on the Oregon Trail in 1844, planted the two trees. The Simmons party settled first along the Columbia River near present day Washougal and then later in Washington at a location named Bush Prairie after another member of the Simmons Party, George Washington Bush.
- Two American chestnut trees growing along Edy Road near Sherwood, Oregon were planted in 1885 by a farmer named Hicks. The trees were featured in the National Geographic Magazine in the February 1990 issue. The property where the trees are located is part of Hawks View Cellars. The picture shows the trees growing along the service entrance to the vineyards.
- One of two American chestnut trees located in Portland, Oregon survives. The age of the trees is not known. One was reduced to a 20 foot tall snag, cut back in early 2016 apparently due to worsening damage caused by a lightning strike some 20 years ago. The picture of the two trees was taken prior to recent removal of a majority of the one damaged by lightning.

The American Chestnut Foundation appreciates any help readers can provide to document how the earliest American chestnuts arrived in the Pacific Northwest. The Foundation would also like to know about other trees that have been identified as American chestnuts.