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By James Barron

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Reviving the all-but-extinct chestnut tree



Ariel Lauren Wilson/New York Restoration Project

It's one of the best-known lines in American poetry: "Under the spreading chestnut tree / The village smithy stands." Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's beloved blacksmiths eventually died out, victims of mass production. So did chestnut trees, victims of a blight.

But now chestnut trees are making a comeback. Some 300 chestnut trees, [crossbred to resist the fungus that began killing their forebears](#) when Theodore Roosevelt was president, have been planted in a park in Upper Manhattan.

So far, so good, said Jason Smith, the director of Northern Manhattan Parks for the [New York Restoration Project](#), which planted the trees five years ago with the city's [Department of Parks and Recreation](#). The taller ones are already more 18 feet high and have a ways to go — American chestnuts once climbed past 100 feet and dominated forests in the eastern United States. "They're not redwoods," he said, "but old black-and-white photos are incredibly dramatic — little people standing in front of the giants of the forest."

Like oysters, they figured in New York City's history and economy, he said. There were chestnuts carts on street corners long before Bob Wells and Mel Torme wrote "The Christmas Song," with the line "chestnuts roasting on an open fire." Smith said he had never tasted an American chestnut. "From what I understand," he said, "the European chestnuts are not as good, which is what we have now."

The fungus that all but destroyed the American chestnut was detected in the early 1900s after trees at the Bronx Zoo began dying. Researchers eventually determined that the fungus had arrived years earlier on imported Japanese trees. The Forest Service considers American chestnuts functionally extinct because chestnut stems sprout from old subterranean roots before dying of the fungus — a cycle repeated year after year.

The 300 new chestnut trees occupy a three-acre site in [Highbridge Park](#), which Smith said his group had worked to clean up, weeding out invasive vines and clearing away abandoned cars and loads of junk. "The big takeaway was you can plant trees on a site that's degraded, and they'll still do very well," he said.

The trees are American-Chinese hybrids developed by the [American Chestnut Foundation](#), a nonprofit that uses traditional breeding methods to generate trees with the blight resistance of Chinese chestnuts and the strength of the original American species. It's a different approach than the Parks Department usually takes with habitat restoration projects, but a spokeswoman said that "hybridization is the only known way to have this historically important tree in our forests."

Sara Fern Fitzsimmons, the foundation's director of restoration and a research technologist with Penn State University, said that Highbridge Park was "the perfect setting" for the project.

Smith said it wasn't surprising that the trees were growing nicely. "It's that this can be done by a neighborhood green group working with local kids," he said. "That can raise expectations for what a forest in New York City can contribute."