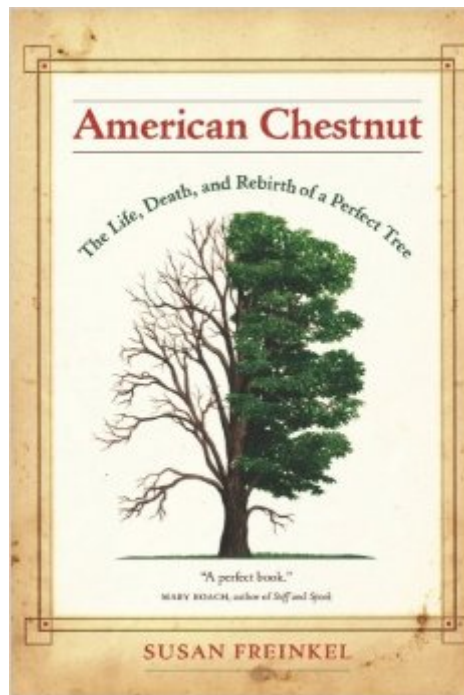


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American Chestnut: The Life, Death, And Rebirth Of A Perfect Tree



Synopsis

The American chestnut was one of America's most common, valued, and beloved trees—a "perfect tree" that ruled the forests from Georgia to Maine. But in the early twentieth century, an exotic plague swept through the chestnut forests with the force of a wildfire. Within forty years, the blight had killed close to four billion trees and left the species teetering on the brink of extinction. It was one of the worst ecological blows to North America since the Ice Age—and one most experts considered beyond repair. In *American Chestnut*, Susan Freinkel tells the dramatic story of the stubborn optimists who refused to let this cultural icon go. In a compelling weave of history, science, and personal observation, she relates their quest to save the tree through methods that ranged from classical plant breeding to cutting-edge gene technology. But the heart of her story is the cast of unconventional characters who have fought for the tree for a century, undeterred by setbacks or skeptics, and fueled by their dreams of restored forests and their powerful affinity for a fellow species.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Somehow over the last 100 years the American public has come to believe that the oak tree is THE all American tree, THE symbol of strength and longevity. Well, this book reminds us of what the American public has forgotten, that the oak tree once had a big brother, a tree that grew faster, grew taller, and lived longer. A tree that produced a wood as rot resistant as redwood, and every fall gave us very tasty and highly nutritious nuts. It was indeed as close to a perfect tree as you can imagine. This is a great book not only because it tells the tale of the American chestnut and its near

demise so well, but also because it goes into great detail about the current restoration efforts and the often hidden "political" battles inside the major organization fighting to restore the chestnut, the American Chestnut Foundation.

As a biologist with an intense avocational interest in the American Chestnut, I planted nearly a hundred seeds on my property in PA way back in 1972. After 8 years of beautiful growth, the blight hit them. I joined the American Chestnut Foundation and discovered a hypovirulent chestnut on my property that I shared with professionals studying the blight fungus. But my interest in chestnuts waned, in part because of the ACF's backcrossing program, until I read Susan Freinkel's marvelous book! The people I knew only as names became personalities--Burnham, Rutter, Hebard--and she introduced me to others, such as Gary and Lucille Griffen, whose work she described finally explained to me why the hypovirulent inoculants I applied to my chestnuts back in 1980 didn't help at all. It's the combination of genetic resistance with hypovirulence that is needed. What an eye opener and what a fantastic book she has written, one that has rekindled my youthful interest in restoring the role of the American Chestnut. Her book supports the huge role natural history plays in producing good science. Passion for a species is a natural element in knowing it.

In Freinkel's eloquent and wry telling of the story of the American chestnut tree's demise and subsequent attempts to revive it, she raises compelling questions: what does it mean to lose a species, and what do our efforts to bring it back say about us? At the start, it made me want to find a lovely tree to curl up under and read all day. At the end, it made me look at trees and those who are working to save them with new appreciation. Equal parts mystery and poetry, history and science, comedy and tragedy, American Chestnut's reach is as wide and gracious and impressive as this tree's branches once were.

As an avid amateur botanist, it is rare when an informative AND interesting book on plants is published. But this the case here. Freinkel speaks with an informative and lyrical voice, making one ponder the tragedy of the loss of this truly magnificent tree. I'm very glad to see this lovely book published, and hope more writers follow Freinkel's example.

I knew an old hill man in Kentucky who would talk about the chestnuts. The beauty of the forest in the spring, the quality of the wood, how people would raise hogs in the woods, and how all the trees died. For hill people, the chestnut was a tree of life. Its eradication from the forest was like mankind

staying, while the Garden of Eden was driven out. He showed us old stumps, their huge outer ring still not rotted, and little sprout trees that were certain to die. This book captures the depth of the tragedy, especially the passages on heroic but doomed efforts to save the trees in the early years of the blight. A Pandora's box of woes empties as the American giants disappear by the millions. There is a theme of arrogance and repeated failure, helpless to stop a biological invader that won. Yet there is also hope. Some chestnuts, even large ones, survive. The surprisingly longstanding breeding programs, strengthened by the science of genetics, offer real hope of a chestnut renaissance. But the new chestnuts will not win. They will harbor and coexist with the organism that nearly wiped out a race of trees. Pandora's box can't be closed, but this book offers a vision of chestnut forests hundreds of years in the future.

In this beautifully written and engaging tale, author Susan Freinkel leads the reader on a fascinating journey through the world of the American Chestnut. Combining first-rate science reporting with lyrical writing, Freinkel is a writer to watch...

I have read a number of books in the genre of environmental science or nature that missed the mark for me when it came to explaining the science of the problem. This book was perfect. Some books spend too much time on personalities - again perfect and seemingly balanced. My only minor complaint was that I didn't need so much preaching about why I should care about the chestnut. I do! This book exceeded my expectations and I truly learned something from it.

I have enjoyed reading this well written book and learning about the scientists and volunteers who are working to restore the species. Science got a little short shrift, which is probably nice for many readers. I learned a lot anyway. Though I did not always agree with the author's opinions, I think this is an important book and may help reduce the general ignorance about the fate of the American Chestnut, something everyone really ought to know about.

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