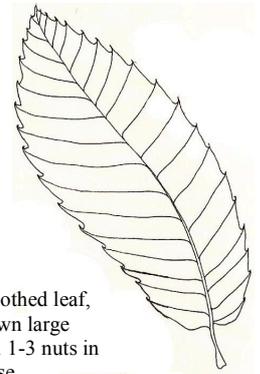


# Chestnut

As a young child growing up in the Northern Hemisphere, I always associated chestnut with European culture: family gathering in front of the open fire roasting chestnuts during Christmastime, roasted chestnuts in warm mitten-ed hands. Now we have settled in ‘down under’ land, warm with bush fire threats rather than mitten-ed hands, I still have a good reason to associate chestnut with Christmas, as we have a chestnut tree in our garden, and it flowers during Christmastime. Many picnic lunches and barbeques we have enjoyed under this flowering chestnut tree! Then the season changes, the smell of roasting chestnuts in June/July are one of my favourite winter day aromas. I’ve been told chestnut trees take some 50 years to start bearing fruits, my tree therefore must be in its late sixties, as old as the house a least, possibly older!



Sharply toothed leaf,  
Shiny brown large  
edible nut. 1-3 nuts in  
prickly case



The chestnut tree, *Castanea sativa*, commonly known as the Sweet or Spanish chestnut, is, despite its name, of West Asian origin. The Greeks brought it to Europe, where it flourished, particularly in the south, more than in its native region. The specific name ‘Spanish’ probably arose because the best chestnut imported into England came from Spain.

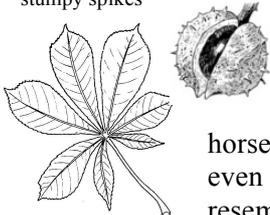
Wild chestnuts are abundant all over south Europe; they are hardy and long-lived trees. It was said one chestnut tree under the foot of Mount Etna was 2000 years old when the erupting volcano killed it! The cultivated varieties are noted for their sizes and flavours, one large nut in each burr, whereas in the wild state, there may be several. Outside Europe, there are chestnuts of several other *Castanea* species, such as the Chinese chestnut, *C. mollissima*, the Japanese chestnut, *C. crenata* and the American chestnut, *C. dentata*. The latter was once a common tree bearing good nuts and widely cultivated until chestnut blight almost wiped it out in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another American species is the dwarf chestnut, *C. pumila*; it has small nuts of good flavours and is referred to as chinquapin, a name of American Indian origin.

Chestnuts are cool climate deciduous trees. The oblong, elliptic leaves have coarse marginal teeth with prominent veins. In early summer the trees produce showy clusters of spikelike creamy yellow catkins of male flowers at the branch tips and the less conspicuous small group of female flowers among the foliage which will later develop into edible nuts, encased in a prickly burr-like husk.

In the Middle Ages, chestnuts of the wild varieties were an important food crop in southern Europe, where communities, which had scarce access to wheat, relied on chestnut flour as their main sources of carbohydrates. While the small wild ones were, and still are, a food for the poorer, the large cultivated chestnuts are an expensive gourmet food! The French are very proud of their ‘marrons glacés’ (candied chestnuts) made with the best and biggest chestnut grown! Chestnuts are also used in stuffing for poultry; they can be made into soups, porridge, bread and cakes. In recent time, chestnut-based recipes are making a come back as part of the trend towards the rediscovery of traditional dishes and the increasing demand for wheat free baking products.

As much as we associate chestnuts with European cuisine, we tend to forget that Oriental cuisine embraces them just as wholeheartedly. Baked, cooked or grilled in rice dishes and many sweet dishes, the humble chestnut is very much one of the main ingredients found in the Japanese repertoire of recipes, while Chinese cuisine mostly uses dried chestnuts.

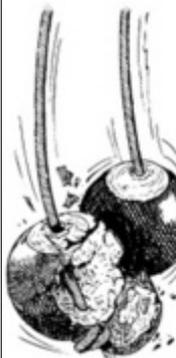
Horse chestnut  
Leaves are grouped. Fruit  
has thick skin with  
stumpy spikes



Sweet chestnuts should not be confused with horse chestnuts. The horse chestnut is an entirely different tree, even though its inedible nuts bear some resemblance externally to those of the sweet chestnut. The sweet chestnut comes in a spiky furry looking casing. The spikes are sharp and densely packed. The horse chestnut has a thick skin with short stumpy spikes. Horse chestnut leaves are grouped together while sweet chestnut has single oval leaf pointed at one end, with a distinctive “saw tooth” edge to it.

The seeds of the horse chestnuts are also known as conkers. The traditional children’s game ‘Conkers’ in Britain and Ireland uses the seed threaded on a string. The game is played by two players, each with a conker threaded onto a piece of string: they take turns striking each other's conker until one breaks.

A famous specimen of the horse chestnut tree was the Anne Frank tree in the center of Amsterdam which she mentioned in her diary and which survived until a heavy wind blew it over not so long ago. Some young specimens, sprouted from seeds of this tree, were transported to the United States. After a long quarantine, each tree was shipped off to a new home at a notable museum or institution and some Holocaust centers.



**How to Win at Conkers**

- Choose a large strong round perfect conker
- Make sure there are no imperfections
- Carefully make a narrow hole through its centre
- Not too big or the conker will split
- Soak the conker in vinegar for a day or two
- Not too long or it might go soft
- Put it in a cool dry place until next autumn
- Remember where or it will be lost
- Tie the conker on a strong long bootlace
- Not thin flimsy horrid string
- Now hit true with a well-timed swing
- Don't snag the lace or you will break
- Bashes, crashes whose conkers smashes?
- Whose will be the winning blow?