

Chestnut

As a young child growing up in the Northern Hemisphere, I always associated chestnut with European culture: roasted chestnuts in warm mitten-ed hands and family gathering in front of the open fire roasting chestnuts during Christmastime. 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 comes May, the tree is laden with fruits, then June, we roast the fruits in our open fire, the smell of roasting chestnuts is one of my favourite winter day aromas.

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 chestnut trees are abundant all over south Europe; they are hardy and long-lived trees, with a typical life expectancy in the range of 200-800 years with some exceptional trees estimated to be as old as 2000 plus years. 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, the Japanese chestnut, and the American chestnut. The latter was once a common tree

Sweet chestnut catkins



bearing good nuts and widely cultivated until chestnut blight almost wiped it out in the early 20th century. Another American species is the dwarf chestnut, 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. The trees are monoecious, meaning that both male and female flowers are found on the same tree. 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.

Sweet chestnuts should not be confused with horse chestnuts which also grow well in our mountain's climate. 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 with very sharp and densely packed spikes, while 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. Horse chestnut flowers are usually white with a yellow-pink blotch at the base of the petals, they are produced in spring in erect panicles with about 20-40 flowers on each panicle.

The inedible seeds of the horse chestnuts are 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 in 2010. When it was found that the tree was suffering from a serious disease a few years before, young specimens sprouted from seeds of this tree were transported to new homes at notable museums, Holocaust centers and other Anne Frank organisations and locations around the world.

Sweet chestnut

Sharply toothed leaf, Shiny brown large edible nut. 1-2 nuts in prickly case



Horse chestnut

Flowers



Nuts have thick skin with stumpy spikes