

*Aesculus glabra*

[Synonyms : *Aesculus echinata*, *Aesculus flava*, *Aesculus macrostachys*, *Aesculus ohioensis*, *Aesculus pallida*, *Pavia glabra*, *Pavia pallida*]

**FETID BUCKEYE** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to central and south-eastern North America it has clusters of creamy-yellow flowers with long, curved stamens, followed by leaflets that turn red, yellow or orange in Autumn.

It is also known as American buckeye, American horse-chestnut, Buckeye, Fetid buckeye, Foetid buckeye, Horse-chestnut, *Jírovec lysý* (Czech), Ohio buckeye, *Paardekastanje* (Dutch), Sevenleaf buckeye, Smooth buckeye, Smooth horse-chestnut, Sticking buckeye, Stinking buckeye, Texas buckeye, White buckeye, and Yellow-flowered chestnut.

The leaves have a strong unpleasant fetid smell when crushed. The shiny dark brown seeds bear a pale scar (the 'buck's eye').

Warning – the seeds (or 'conkers') are inedible raw, as are the crushed or bruised bark, buds, seedlings, leaves, twigs, flowers – and honey. Overdoses can cause salivation, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhoea, muscular weakness, and depression, and even imbalance and shortness of breath, leading to coma and death. The bark and seeds are poisonous for livestock too and the young shoots are toxic for cattle (which explains why some landowners remove it) – on the other hand squirrels appear to enjoy eating it with impunity.

*Glabra* is Latin (hairless, bald) meaning 'hairless or smooth'.

The common name Buckeye is said to be a comparison of the pale scar on the seeds with the eye of the buck deer.

Some North American Indian tribes processed the shiny dark brown seeds by roasting them slowly, then cutting them up and putting them in a bag which was suspended in a flowing stream for 4-5 days. The meat was then dried and ground for flour which was used to make gruel.

The Delaware North American Indian fishermen scattered ground nuts on the surface of streams to stun the fish.

Both the Mohegan and Delaware Indians seem to have put some faith in the nuts (if carried on the person) for easing rheumatic pain. The Delaware also used either a very small amount of the nut oil or a ground nut infusion as an ingredient in a mixture to obtain relief from earache.

Fetid buckeye is the State tree for Ohio (United States) and was adopted there in 1953. In 1840 when William Henry Harrison (1773-1841) ran for office to become the 9<sup>th</sup> President of the United States his Whig supporters carried buckeye canes as today they would have worn campaign buttons – and by the end of that Century the tree's association with the State had become well-established. It was only one further step for the State to be referred to as the 'Buckeye State' – and this nickname was adopted by the State officially in 1953 too.

Apparently, as similarly with some of the Indian tribes, it became traditional practice among European settlers to carry the fruit (nuts or 'buckeyes') in a pocket to protect against rheumatism. (Unlike the European traditions, North American authorities seem to make no mention that the effectiveness of this custom could depend on whether they had been

begged for or stolen.) The practice still continues but the 'protection' can now extend to headaches and general pains in the joints. The buckeye is definitely hard-worked however. In some parts of North America some of the settlers and their descendants, especially the men – even as recently as the 1970s – carried the buckeye in their pockets for a very different reason. A superstition had sprung up there that these nuts could bring good fortune in sex as, according to some, the shape of the buckeye's scar resembled that of testicles. Then there are the African-Americans for whom the nut for many brought bad luck as they believed it was associated with voodoo ((or hoodoo) traditions. Then again there were those that were sure that the buckeye's presence would increase the supply of pocket money for the wearer and yet others who were certain that with appropriate processing the nut would become a gambler's lucky charm.

The buckeyes (cut up and infused in hot water) have provided an alternative for soap for humans as well as for their clothes – apparently both will retain a lingering horse-chestnut smell.

Early European settlers in North America used its tough, whitish wood to make their cabins. But its lightness encouraged its use for much smaller items ranging from coffins and artificial limbs to wooden hats – and it has been used for turning and felled for pulp. The wood has also been burnt as fuel.

The tree was introduced to Britain in 1812.

Fetid buckeye is cultivated as an ornamental plant.

Medicinally, records seem to suggest that local herbalists have used fetid buckeye in minute quantities internally for treating fever, some nervous disorders, asthma and spasmodic coughs, and externally for easing piles and rheumatism.