

Castanea dentata

[Synonyms : *Castanea americana*, *Castanea sativa* var. *americana*, *Castanea vesca*, *Castanea vesca* var. *americana*, *Castanea vulgaris* var. *americana*, *Fagus-castanea dentata*, *Fagus dentata*]

AMERICAN CHESTNUT is a deciduous tree. Native to North America (but rare there now) it has fragrant greenish-white catkins.

It is also known as American sweet chestnut, *Amerikaanse kastanje* (Dutch), *Amerika guri* (Japanese), *Amerikanische Kastanie* (German), *Amerikanischer Edelkastanienbaum* (German), *Amerikankastanja* (Finnish), *Amerikansk kastanj* (Swedish), *Castagno american* (Italian), *Castaño americano* (Spanish), *Châtaignier d'Amérique* (French), Chestnut, Chinquapin, *Kashtan amerikanskii* (Russian), *Kashtan zubchatyi* (Russian), *Kastaneo Amerika* (Esperanto), North American chestnut, Prickly o-heh-yah-bur, Sweet chestnut, White chestnut, and Wormy chestnut.

Dentata is Latin (toothed).

The American chestnut was a long favoured source of vegetable tannin in North America until it was superseded by the sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) in the 1950s.

Its edible fruit used also to be as highly prized as those of the sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) in France. As in Europe some of the North American Indian tribes, for instance the Cherokee, made bread from ground chestnuts. The crushed nuts provided a flavouring for Iroquois bread (and in their puddings) and the nuts were also used for making sauces and soups. As with other members of the genus American chestnut nuts were a staple food for the Iroquois tribe and could be found as an ingredient in some delicacies. The fresh nuts were crushed and boiled by the Iroquois for a beverage, and the Cherokee used them similarly as a coffee substitute.

Apart from food and drink, the Iroquois harnessed insect repellent qualities by mixing the nut oil with bear grease for a mosquito repellent, and the Cherokees used the durable lightweight wood for construction, fence posts and fuel and obtained a brown dye from the bark.

The Iroquois Indians added the bark to puppies' food to counter worms.

Its medicinal use among the Indian tribes seems to have been varied. On the one hand for instance the Mohican Indians used it to treat colds, rheumatism and whooping-cough, while on the other the Cherokees chose it for treating stomach upsets, childbirth problems, heart ailments, coughs, typhoid and sores.

The greyish-brown wood was once used to make railway sleepers, shingling, mine props, poles, fences, furniture, barrel staves, crates and coffins. It was also used as pulpwood and collected for fuel.

Even in the 19th Century great tracts of North American land were covered in chestnut forests. But in the 20th Century this all changed. Although the trees had been subject to excessive felling for their wood, the dramatic decline in their numbers was due primarily to an attack of chestnut blight, *Endothia parasitica*, a fungus that destroyed most of this species on that Continent. The disease had been introduced accidentally to New York State from eastern Asia in 1904 when some host saplings were imported. The fungus kills the tree by eating into the bark and encircling the trunk. American chestnuts had virtually

disappeared by the 1940s. Authorities note that the fungus, prevalent in the Far East, has not wrought the same damage there. Neither has it caused similar problems for European chestnuts in Europe – but it has attacked European chestnut species that have been introduced to the North American Continent in the past (apart from some on the extreme western side of that Continent beyond the mountain ranges).

The loss of the trees themselves, as well as their fruit, would be bad enough but the reliable source of tannin is understood to have been particularly sorely missed. The wood of dead trees was still used to extract tannin for a time following the fungus attack, but even of these there was a limited supply.