

Castanea sativa

[Synonyms : *Castanea vesca*, *Castanea vulgaris*, *Fagus castanea*]

SWEET CHESTNUT is a deciduous tree. Native to western Asia, to North Africa and to southern Europe, it has yellowish-green catkins and leaves that turn golden in Autumn. It is also known as *Ægte Kastanie* (Danish), *Äkta Kastanj* (Swedish), *Ätlig Kastanj* (Swedish), *Castagno* (Italian), *Castagno domestico* (Italian), *Castanheiro* (Portuguese), *Castanier* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Castaño* (Spanish), *Castanwydden* (Welsh), Chastey, *Châtaigne* (French), *Chât'nyi* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Chesteine, Chestnut, Common chestnut, *Echte Kastanie* (German), *Edelkastanie* (German), *Edel-Kastanienbaum* (German), *Esskastanie* (German), *Ess-Kastanienbaum* (German), Euboean nut, Eurasian chestnut, European chestnut, French nut, *Gaštan jedlý* (Slovak), Husked nut, Italian chestnut, *Jalokastanja* (Finnish), Jupiter's nut, *Kastaneo ordinara* (Esperanto), *Kastangeboorn* (Dutch), *Kastanie* (German), *Kastanienbaum* (German), *Kaštanovník jedlý* (Czech), *Kaštanovník setý* (Czech), *Keschtan* (Russian), *Kestane ag* (Turkish), *Marone* (German), *Marone* (German), *Maronenbaum* (German), *Marron* (French), Meat nut, *Ni-keri* (Indian), Sardinian nut, Sardinian nut, and Spanish chestnut; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of luxury, and 'render me justice' (tree).

Sativa means 'cultivated'.

Some authorities believe that the ancient Greeks introduced trees from Sardes (or Sardis) in what is now western Turkey and they note that Xenophon (c.435-354) the celebrated Greek historian and military commander, reported in 300 BC that Persian noblemen's children were reared on chestnuts to enhance their growth.

It is only in Mediterranean climates that the largest and best sweet nuts appear on the tree. Here, in the mountainous areas, it has provided a staple food for thousands of years. Wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) was not normally available to the poor, thus bread had to be made from other materials, one of which was chestnuts. At times the chestnuts were so important that they were a currency for bartering, especially in Corsica where the forests in the heart of the island were essential to the population's survival and economy (and also in the Cevennes region of southern France where it was once cultivated). For the Corsicans the nuts fulfilled the potato's (*Solanum tuberosum*) role – as well as providing a flour for bread – and the Island was one of the last area's to succumb to the potato's advance through Europe. After the Corsicans harvested the wild chestnuts they used to lay them out to dry in bureau drawers and relied on this horde in times of extreme need. Today they still use a phrase that dates back to this practice to describe somebody who eats poorly

They eat out of the drawer.

In France the cultivation was promoted by the Church from the 8th Century. After a long period of relative stability in the region this all halted temporarily early in the 17th Century however, not least because of the political and religious unrest which began in Western Europe in 1618. Then in the 18th and 19th Centuries there was a rapid return to chestnut cultivation in the Cevennes, combined with meticulous husbandry of the area. The beginning of the 20th Century saw another decline caused primarily by the pressures of modern life, but since the 1960s it seems that a gradual revival of the old 'chestnut'

values and practices may be returning there, particularly with the renewed interest in organic farming.

Popular with the Romans (who are believed to have introduced it to Britain and elsewhere on the European continental mainland) the nuts are today part of the staple diet of Corsica, the Massif Central area in France, Sardinia and parts of northern Italy, as they have been for centuries. [These areas are also joined by Japan where it is particularly sought after at their New Year celebrations – but in the past, as in Europe, has been a mainstay of the poor.] In contrast in bygone centuries through to the present day the sweet chestnut has only attracted a muted enthusiasm in England. The nuts used to be carried by the street sellers who sang out their wares in the traditional old Cries, and artists even portrayed the glowing roast chestnut braziers familiar then at fairs or on the streets– and roast chestnuts can still be found occasionally on street corners today. Boiled or roasted the nuts continue to be part of time-honoured English Christmas fare – but the English, unlike their Continental neighbours, seem to get far more enjoyment from the thought of their traditional use than from actually eating them. Few of the nuts mature on trees in the cooler temperate areas and, when they do, they never reach their best. This may well go some way to explaining why sweet chestnuts were generally fed to pigs in England. (Britain, as does now the United States, imports most chestnuts that are going to be eaten by human beings.)

In Europe especially, meal from the nuts was used for whitening linen and making starch. The nuts were a source of flour and oil, and they have also provided a coffee substitute. The leaves were used as a rustling mattress filling.

The bark has offered a source of vegetable tannin for centuries. Today bark extract from the sweet chestnut is the third most popular tanning import in the United States, United Kingdom and Japan, most of it coming in order of importance from Italy, Spain, Portugal and France.

It is recognized that although the wood is strong, it loses its durability if it is allowed to grow for more than 50 years as it has very little sap wood and the tree can crack. Thus although it was once thought that it had been used in the roof of both Westminster Hall in London and Parliament House in Edinburgh it was realized earlier in the 20th Century that this wood must be sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*) which has a similar grain and colour. The specific beams referred to in these two buildings could not have reached their individual lengths in less than 50 years' growth, despite the speed with which the sweet chestnut can grow.

The relatively hard wood has been used for many different purposes from fencing, wine barrels and pit-props to building construction-work and furniture.

In the world of dreams it is said that eating the fruit indicates a business problem, and cooking them implies that the dreamer could be exploited.

Like many other plants sweet chestnuts were once used in love divination rituals. One involved placing appropriately named nuts near the fire to see which exploded first in the heat.

Maidens, name your chestnuts true.

The first to burst belongs to you!

The sweet chestnut also features in Christian lore. It signifies victory over temptations of the flesh, and chastity.

In Japan on the other hand it seems to have acquired a meaning of 'mastery' (because it is contended that part of the written Japanese character for 'mastery' could suggest the character for the word 'chestnut'). Whatever – the alleged force of character explains the inclusion of chestnuts in Japanese New Year feasting when the food stands for attributes to be aspired to in the following year.

Chestnuts play a role in festive food in several European countries. Apparently the Italian poet, Pietro Aretino (1492-1556) lauded candied chestnuts made in the Turin region during his lifetime – more than 100 years before the French Sun King was born. If this is correct it flies in the face of French tradition that they made the first ever candied chestnuts (*marron glacés*) during the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715). Today *marron glacés* are a well-known traditional French sweetmeat which few of us will have realised involves 16 separate operations if prepared correctly. Another festive chestnut dish can be found in Italy. It is eaten on St. Martin's Day in Modena – wine-soaked, roasted chestnuts.

Sweet chestnuts feature in literature. For example the English playwright, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) refers to them in three plays including *Macbeth*. One of the witches tells how

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
And mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd:

In the 1970s some authorities were claiming that a Sicilian sweet chestnut near Mount Etna boasted a trunk (though split) with the greatest circumference of all known sweet chestnut trees at 167 ft. It was believed to be 3½-4 thousand years old and, although much narrower in the 20th Century, has been recorded as achieving a girth of 210.62 ft in September 1845. Locally it acquired the name *Castagno dei Cento Cavalli* which means 'chestnut tree of a hundred horses' as according to legend it provided shelter from a thunderstorm for a visiting Queen of Aragon and one hundred of her horsemen. (There is some discrepancy between various authorities as to the present plight of this tree.) On a more modest scale in England, in the late 1990s the Tree Register of the British Isles named a sweet chestnut in Kent, known locally as 'The Seven Sisters', as the largest living tree in the Islands at that time.

Today the timber is used on a commercial scale for carpentry and turning eg. furniture, and tannin extract from the bark is popular for tanning leather. The toiletry industry uses the leaves and chestnut skins for 'natural' shampoos, Chestnut flour (as wheat flour, *Triticum aestivum*) is used by the food industry for purées and sweetmeats – and the exchequers of various Mediterranean countries benefit from the export trade in the fruit (nuts) to the United States.

Medicinally, an infusion of the fresh leaves was used in the past in a treatment for whooping-cough, and a decoction of bark was relied upon for fevers. Today's herbalists still recommend the use of the sweet chestnut for dealing with fevers, diarrhoea, piles and respiratory problems, particularly coughs, catarrh and whooping-cough.