

Juglans cinerea

[Synonyms : *Juglans cathartica*, *Juglans oblonga*, *Wallia cinerea*]

BUTTERNUT is a deciduous tree. Native to eastern North America it has strongly-ribbed and hard-shelled, egg-shaped, light brown fruit.

It is also known as American white walnut, *Butternuss* (German), Butternut-walnut, Gray walnut, *Kanadischer Nussbaum* (German), Lemon-nut, Lemon walnut, Long walnut, Oil-bean-nut, Oil-nut, *Ořešák popelavý* (Czech), Walnut, and White walnut; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘lack of dignity’.

Cinerea is derived from Latin *cinereus* (ash-grey) with reference to the bark.

The nuts were eaten by various North American Indian tribes, including the Menominee, some of both the Chippewa and Algonkin tribes, and the Cherokee Indians. The Potawatomi and Meskwaki tribes harvested and stored the nuts for Winter food – and for the Iroquois especially authorities note that they seem to have been a staple in their diet. The Iroquois not only used them as an ingredient for bread or to make soups, sauces, puddings and delicacies but they also prepared the nut-meat as baby food and also used it to make a drink. In due time settlers used nut oil as a strongly flavoured seasoning. Apart from the edible ripe nut, the half-ripe fruit can be pickled. and the sap can be used to make sugar.

The fruit husks (and inner bark) yield a yellowish-orange dye for cloth, and they were once used by the Menominee tribe to dye their deerskin shirts brown as well. The bark provided the Menominee’s with a black dye that was deepened in colour by boiling with blue clay. On the other hand the roots were used to obtain a black dye by the Chippewa and Cherokee Indians, and both tribes made a brown dye with the bark. North American settlers chose the bark as a source of a dark brown, wool dye. During the American Civil War in the 1860s backwoods regiments used it to dye the material for their tough, home-made uniforms, particularly their ‘butternut’ jeans.

Cherokee Indians used the wood for construction, and the Iroquois tribe put their faith in a mixture of nut oil and bear grease as a mosquito repellent.

Some North American Indian tribes used the butternut medicinally. For the Menominee syrup and sugar were a basic remedy. According to records it seems to have served many purposes for the Iroquois in this context – as they used it to treat liver problems, urinary complaints, female ailments, blood disorders, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, oral problems and worms and also applied it to wounds. Various parts of the tree seem to have been especially popular as a purgative or laxative used according to authorities by the Meskwaki, Malecite, Cherokee, Menominee, Micmac, Chippewa, Iroquois and Potawatomi Indians. It provided a treatment for diarrhoea among the Cherokee tribe, and a tonic for the Potawatomi. The Iroquois and Cherokee both turned to it for easing toothache.

Today the nuts are a commercial ingredient for the food industry (in confectionery and ice cream).

The greyish-brown wood has been used for veneering and building interiors, as well as for making furniture, crates and boxes.

Medicinally, today however even folk medicines rarely include the plant now although it used to be part of treatments for constipation (the bark), fever and tapeworms (the oil from the fruit).