

Chestnuts

When growing chestnuts at home, it is important to distinguish between the “real” chestnut trees (*Castanea* species) and those trees producing horse-chestnuts and buckeyes (*Aesculus* species). The seeds of the latter two are potentially poisonous and should not be eaten. To distinguish between edible chestnuts and the others it is helpful to look at the fruit and leaves or take a sample of the plant to your county Extension office for identification.

Chestnuts	Horsechestnuts, buckeyes
VERY prickly burr that encloses one to three nuts (use leather gloves to handle)	A few, short, flexible prickles (easily handled)
Fruit (burr) divides into two or four parts	Fruit (burr) divides into three parts
Long, narrow leaves with teeth at the end of each major vein	Large compound leaves generally composed of five to nine leaflets sharing a common stem
Starchy, edible	Bitter taste

STORAGE

If chestnuts are to be cooked within several weeks after they are picked, they do not need to be seasoned or air-dried. Otherwise, spread the nuts one to two layers deep on trays made of ½-inch mesh hardware cloth for several days to remove excess moisture and to retard mold formation. If they are to be eaten raw, they need a few weeks for the starch to slowly change (this occurs in both air-drying and refrigerated storage). If the nuts are eaten right away, they may have an astringent taste.

Storage conditions must be just right, not too dry and not too damp. In dry air, chestnuts dry out and lose quality; in damp air, they mold quickly. If a chestnut shell can be pushed in a considerable

amount, the nut has dried too much. Chestnuts can be kept in a refrigerator for several months. First place the nuts in a closed paper sack for a day or two until they reach refrigerator temperature. Then transfer the nuts to a sealed plastic sack that has about a dozen holes punched in the plastic with a medium nail.

If molding occurs in the refrigerator, wash and/or scrub the nuts to remove the mold and place on paper toweling. After one or two paper changes, allow them to room-dry for several hours. After drying, replace the nuts in a paper sack in the refrigerator until they are chilled, and then transfer them to a clean plastic bag with holes punched in it. If mold persists, the kernel may become “off-colored” and no longer edible. If mold has been present, any bad kernels can be spotted by cutting the nuts in half before cooking.

Once chestnuts have been cooked and shelled, they must be stored in tightly sealed jars in the refrigerator for one to two months or in the freezer for up to a year.

ROASTING CHESTNUTS

The most popular method of cooking chestnuts is roasting. DO NOT roast a chestnut until one or two holes have been punctured in each shell with an ice pick or knife. Or use a sharp knife to cut a ½-inch “X” on the flat side of each nut, cutting down to the meat. If the shell is not punctured, steam pressure will build up and cause the nuts to explode either before or after they come out of the oven.

To Roast Over Fire: Prick each chestnut, as indicated above, before roasting. Using a long-handled, covered utensil with a perforated bottom — such as a popcorn popper or chestnut roaster —

shake the utensil gently over the fire until the shells open and the nuts become toasty and brown. Partially cool and peel while still warm.

To Roast in the Oven: Prick each chestnut, as indicated above, before roasting. Preheat the oven to 300 to 325 °F. Spread the nuts on a cookie sheet and bake, stirring occasionally for 15 to 20 minutes, or until the shells open and the nuts can be removed easily. Partially cool and peel while still warm.

BOILED CHESTNUTS

Cut the chestnuts in half with a sharp knife. Place them in a shallow pan with water that barely covers them. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat and boil gently for 15 to 20 minutes. Drain and partially cool; then remove the kernels using a sharp tine of a fork. The longer the nuts are cooked, the mealier the kernels become, and the more they crumble upon removal from the shells. For especially dry chestnuts, soak them overnight in water before boiling in fresh water.

STEAMED CHESTNUTS

Steaming the chestnuts is the best method for easy removal of the kernel. Cut the chestnuts in half and cook them in a vegetable steamer over boiling water for 8 to 10 minutes. Most kernels should fall out of the shells during cooking.

RECIPE IDEAS

Buttered Chestnuts: Dip the steamed or boiled nuts in melted butter and sprinkle with salt.

Braised Chestnuts:

1 pound chestnuts, shelled (see instructions below)
1 cup beef broth
1/8 teaspoon ground pepper
1 tablespoon butter or margarine
Put chestnuts, broth and pepper in a covered saucepan. Simmer for 15 to 20 minutes. Drain. Add butter or margarine and shake the pan to coat chestnuts. Serve hot.

To Shell: Cut 1/2-inch slits or “x’s” in the flat sides and drop them in boiling water for 1-2 minutes. While chestnuts are warm, remove shells and inner

skins, using a sharp knife. This is not always easy. If skins are particularly difficult to remove, reboil for a few seconds.

Serving suggestions for braised chestnuts:
Add braised chestnuts to a stuffing or dressing. (1 cup chestnuts to 1 cup bread crumbs.)

Chop braised chestnuts and combine with cooked red cabbage or Brussels sprouts.

Fresh Cauliflower Chestnut Casserole

(6 Servings)

1 medium cauliflower
Boiling water
1¼ teaspoons salt
1 pound chestnuts, shelled
2 tablespoons butter or margarine
¼ teaspoon white pepper
2 tablespoons hot water

Break cauliflower into flowerets. Place in saucepan with 1 inch boiling water and 1 teaspoon salt. Bring to a boil and cook uncovered 5 minutes. Cover and cook 5 minutes longer. Drain. Put a layer of cauliflower in a buttered casserole, cover with a layer of chestnuts, dot with butter or margarine and sprinkle lightly with white pepper mixed with remaining ¼ teaspoon salt. Continue until all ingredients are used. Add the 2 tablespoons hot water. Cover and bake in 350 °F oven 30 minutes.

Sources:

1. UC Berkeley Cooperative Extension Service (1996). Chestnuts for the holidays [www document]. URL <http://soar.berkeley.edu/recipes/gifts/recipe20.rec>
2. Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service (1996). Growing Chestnuts [www documents]. URL <http://www.msue.msu.edu/msue/imp/mod03/03900044.html>

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