

# Castanea sativa

## Sweet Chestnut



**August 2012**

*Ripe sweet chestnuts*

Native to Southern Europe and Asia Minor, *Castanea sativa* was introduced to this country by the Romans and has been a familiar sight for so long that it is now considered an 'honorary' native. It is a fast growing, deciduous tree, typically reaching between 20 and 30m in height, making a handsome specimen in any park or garden.

The leaves are long and lanceolate with a deeply toothed edge. In late June - July, there are catkins up to 20cm in length which bear both the male flowers at the tip and female flowers at the base. When Autumn comes, the female flowers develop into the chestnuts, protected by the spiny outer casing, dropping to the ground as they ripen. The leaves turn a glorious yellow before falling.

For over two thousand years, *Castanea sativa* has been cultivated for its edible nuts. Historically they were a staple food, either eaten in meals or ground down and used as a flour. They provide a good source of starch and energy - Roman soldiers reputedly ate chestnut porridge before going into battle! In parts of Europe they are still widely eaten and are often used in confectionary and as a delicacy. For an optimum chestnut harvest, the trees need sufficient moisture and a mild climate - a late spring frost can have a detrimental effect to flowering.

## Plant Profile

**Name:** *Castanea sativa*

**Common Name:** Sweet Chestnut, Marron or Spanish Chestnut

**Family:** Fagaceae

**Height:** approx. 20-30 metres

**Demands:** Suited to most conditions . Moderately lime tolerant

**Flowers:** Long, yellow-white catkins in summer

**Foliage:** Elongated green leaves with deep, serrated edges. Yellow in autumn

**Fruit:** Sweet chestnuts - an essential for Christmas time!

**Bark:** Smooth when young then developing a grooved, net like pattern and spiraling with age



*Castanea sativa 25-30-35cm girth standards*

Deepdale  
There are 52 sweet chestnuts dating back to the mid 1600's in Greenwich Park. They were planted in avenues by André le Nôtre for King Charles II. The largest has a girth of 7.26m.



40-45cm girth standard



Autumn colour



14-16-18cm girth standards



Male and female flowers on catkins in late June - July

#### CASTANEA SATIVA FACTS

The wood from *Castanea sativa* is durable, hard and strong. The tree is very responsive to coppicing and so when practised, it produces a good supply every fifteen to thirty years. Uses include barrel making, furniture production and as the high tannin content makes it suitable for outdoors, fencing, posts and stakes.

The hardness of the sweet chestnut has ensured that we are left with many ancient trees throughout Europe. Britain's oldest example is known as the "Great Chestnut of Tortworth". Located in South Gloucestershire, written records date it back to the 12th Century (when it was still known by this name) and it has a girth size of over 11m. The largest and oldest chestnut in the world is the "Hundred Horse Chestnut" located 5 miles from the crater of Mount Etna, Sicily. With a girth almost 60m it is estimated to be between 2,000 and 4,000 years of age. Legend has it that Joan of Aragon, Queen of Naples and her company of 100 mounted knights sheltered under the tree during a severe thunderstorm - hence the name 'hundred horse'.