Chestnuts

When growing chestnuts at home, it is important to distinguish between the "real" chestnut trees (Castanea species) and those trees producing horsechestnuts 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.

A Comparison of Chestnuts & Horsechestnuts & Buckeyes

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

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 up to 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 mealer 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
1 1/4 teaspoons salt
1 1 pound chestnuts, shelled
2 tablespoons butter or margarine
1/4 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 1/4 teaspoon salt. Continue until all ingredients are used. Add the 2 tablespoons hot water. Cover and bake in 350 °F oven 30 minutes.

Sources:

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Food Safety Specialist; J. McLeod Scott, HGIC Horticulture Extension Agent; Donald L. Ham, Extension Urban Forestry Specialist; and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University. (New 01/01.)

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.