

## Chestnuts vs. Horse Chestnuts

Fall is the time of year when serious questions concerning the identification of edible chestnuts (*Castanea sativa*) vs. horse chestnuts (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), or buckeyes (*Aesculus glabra*), come up. This is when the fruits of both types of tree have completed the ripening process, begin to fall, and become easily available to small and not-so-small children. Confusion arises because of the similarity of these nuts. The similarity, however, ends on the outside, because the meat of the true chestnut is quite edible and good, and that of the horse chestnut is toxic and capable of causing paralysis and death, especially if eaten raw.

It is prudent to consider any large chestnut-like nuts to be toxic until proven without a doubt to be otherwise. Take a lesson from those who know best, the squirrels. They will not eat horse chestnuts and neither should humans.

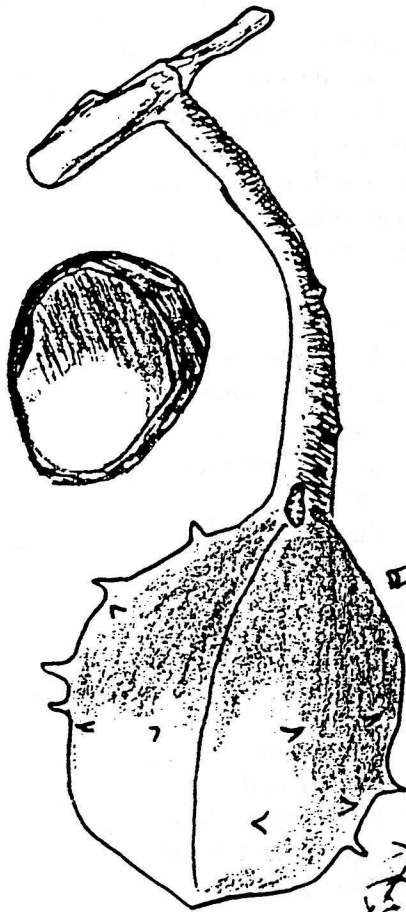
Telling the difference between the edible chestnut and the inedible horse chestnut is not easy if only the nuts are available. True chestnuts tend to be bilaterally flattened, whereas horse chestnuts are flattened on one side only. However, unless you've seen both together, it's not easy or safe to make a judgment based on the appearance of the nuts alone. If the husks (the outer coverings in which the nuts are enclosed) are available, identification becomes easier. The husk of the true chestnut is spiny and needle sharp. These spines cover the entire surface of the husk, making it difficult to pick up and handle. Horse chestnut husks tend to be either smooth or have only a few warts or weak-spined protuberances. These are easy to handle.

Leaves can be used to distinguish between true and horse chestnuts. True chestnut leaves are simple, that is, each leaf is composed of a single part. They are about six to eight inches long, two inches wide, and somewhat oblong and lance-shaped. The teeth along the edges are large and coarse. In spring the tree's flowers are arranged in hanging catkins, many stalks of small, white flowers.

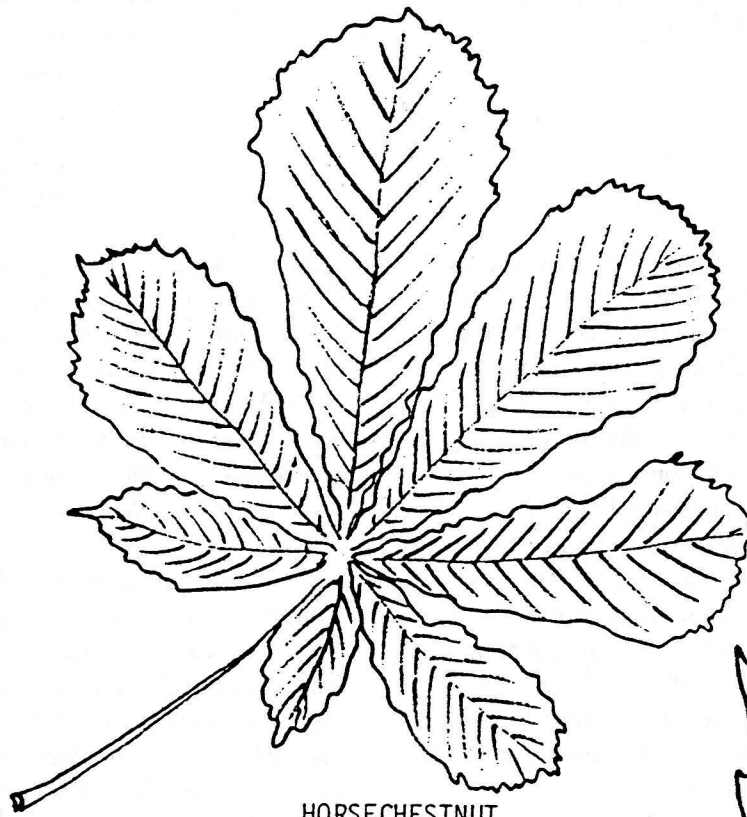
The horse chestnut has leaves that are palmately compound, that is, each leaf is composed of three to seven leaflets arranged in a fan, or open-palm, shape. The teeth of the individual leaflets are much smaller and less distinct than those of true chestnuts. The flowers are quite large and arranged in upright, very showy panicles. They range from creamy white to yellow to red, depending on the particular species.

Finally, there are far more horse chestnut trees planted along the streets and in the parks of Seattle and Tacoma than there are chestnut trees. So, odds are the nuts you've happened upon are dangerously inedible.

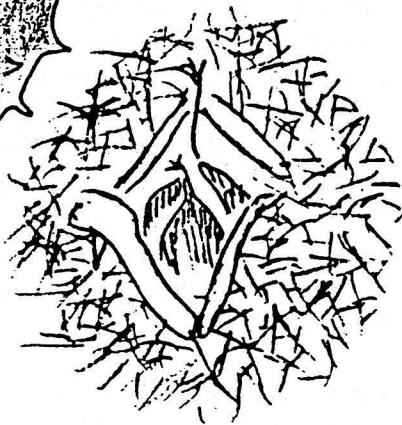
See illustrations on next side.



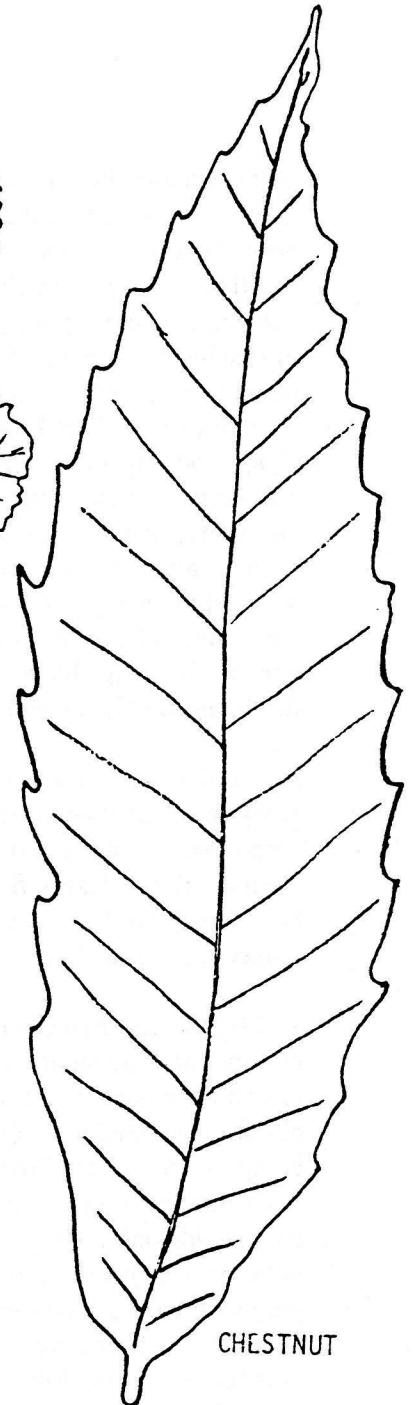
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