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Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

## FLORA IN SWITZERLAND

### Sweet Chestnut – Edelkastanie



The chestnut tree belongs to the beech family. The European species sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) is the only European species of chestnut, though successfully introduced to the Himalayas and other temperate parts of Asia.

Chestnuts should not be confused with horse chestnuts, which are unrelated to *Castanea* and are named for producing nuts of similar appearance but of no notable edibility. Nor should they be confused with water chestnut, which are also unrelated to *Castanea* and are tubers of similar taste from an aquatic herbaceous plant.

Chestnut trees are fast-growing. They can reach a height of around 30 m. They tend to grow very erect when planted among others; when standing on their own, they spread on the sides and develop broad, rounded, dense crowns at maturity.

The fruit is contained in a spiny (very sharp) cupule 5-11 cm in diameter, also called "burr". The burrs are often paired or clustered on the branch and contain one to seven nuts according to the different species. Around the time the fruits reach maturity, the burrs turn yellow-brown and split open in 2 or 4 sections. They can remain on the tree longer than they hold the fruit, but more often achieve complete opening and release the fruits only after having fallen on the ground; opening is partly due to soil humidity.

The chestnut fruit has a pointed end with a small tuft at its tip, and at the other end, a pale brown attachment scar. It has two skins. The first one is a hard outer shiny brown husk, and underneath the husk there is another thinner skin, called the "pellicle". The pellicle closely adheres to the seed itself. The superior fruiting varieties among European chestnuts have good size, sweet taste and easy to remove inner skins.

The sweet chestnut was introduced into Europe from Asia Minor. It has been a staple food in southern Europe, Turkey and southwestern and eastern Asia for millennia, largely replacing cereals where these would not grow well in mountainous Mediterranean areas. Until the introduction of the potato, whole forest-dwelling communities which had scarce access to wheat flour relied on chestnuts as their main source of carbohydrates. Their popularity has declined during the last few centuries, partly due to their reputation of "food for poor people".



Sweet chestnut

Fresh chestnut fruits have about 180 calories (800 kJ) per 100 grams of edible parts, which is much lower than walnuts, almonds, other nuts and dried fruit (about 600 kcal/100 g). Chestnuts, as with all plant foods, contain no cholesterol and contain very little fat, mostly unsaturated, and no gluten. Their carbohydrate content compares with that of wheat and rice. They are the only "nuts" that contain vitamin C.