



## **Bonkers for Conkers**

If a Horse Chestnut tree (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) was a person it would be the equivalent of the pub bore who has the first leaves, biggest blossom and shiniest seeds. It is visually spectacular throughout the seasons, even in winter it is ahead of the curve with glistening bulbs ready to burst forth into large, bright green leaves. Then there are the magnificent 'candles' of white or, more unusually, pink blossom and finally the spiky seed cases reveal that most glamorous of seeds - the conker.

Despite being a distinctive feature of the British landscape, horse chestnuts are not native but arrived from the Balkans early in the 17c. There is no agreement on the origins of their name. One explanation is the end of the fallen leaf stalk is horseshoe shaped, another is that the conker visible from a partially split casing resembles the eye of a startled horse. A further horsey theory is that they arrived in Britain the same time as some horses started to be described as 'chestnuts' - a reference to the reddish brown conker.

Since their arrival in Britain, horse chestnuts have been highly valued as landscape trees, particularly in a mass display such as a planted avenue. In 1765 Capability Brown ordered 4,800 for a single estate in Tottenham Wiltshire.

Unlike their namesake, the sweet Spanish chestnut, apart from looking nice and shady spreading, horse chestnuts are not trees of utility. Sweet chestnuts produce a delicious seed with many culinary uses and their timber is used for fencing, poles and furniture. Horse chestnut timber is too soft for building uses and does not even burn particularly well. Its seeds are inedible, even pigs are not over keen. Conkers and chestnut tree bark have been used in some folk remedies but perhaps their most famous, and dubious, claim is their ability to repel spiders. This belief may have arisen as conkers fall to the ground the same time of the year as enormous spiders decide to come scuttling across the sitting room floor. Most spider phobics will try anything once, but sadly, in 2009 those spoil-sport boffins at the Royal Society of Chemistry firmly disproved this theory. Following a battery of tests, they found that no spider was deterred by the sight, smell or touch of a conker.

In September, just as children start return to school, conkers start to fall to the ground, there can be few people over a certain age who still don't hover to pick up a lime green casing to reveal an enormous, potential champion. In Sue Townsend's '*The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*', the eponymous teenage hero in his desire to be regarded as an intellectual decides to eschew the conker season, but relents and:

*Went out conkering with Nigel tonight. I found  
five big beauties and smashed Nigel's into pulp.  
Ha! Ha! Ha!*

Like any game, conkers has its theories as to how to improve a conker's winning potential including soaking in them vinegar or baking in the oven. All you then need is a willing parent to drill the hole for the string or shoelace, and off you go to find an adversary. For those still yearning for a good game of conkers, the World Conker Championships are held annually in Ashton, Northants.

For a tree that is the embodiment of arboreal vigour the drying and browning of horse chestnut leaves as early as July is a sad sight. This is caused by burrowing moth larvae which strips the gloss from the leaves, leaving them limp and brown at the height of summer. Horse chestnuts can also be affected by a bacterial infection which makes the bark strip off and bleed. The damage caused by the leaf miner is not considered fatal, but the spreading infection may become so. Which could be a sad end to this incredible tree.