

Food, Nutrition & Science

FROM THE LEMPert REPORT



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Chestnuts

Garden to Table



Like peanut butter and jelly, Chestnuts and Christmas seem to go hand in hand. With half the calories of other nuts, the lowest fat content of all the main edible nuts, and high fiber content, it's no wonder that chestnuts continue to make a great, guilt-free addition to any holiday meal. More like cereal grain in carbohydrate content than other nuts, chestnuts shine when made into flour, are great boiled or roasted, and expertly spruce up any celebratory dish. Enjoyed worldwide, chestnuts are used in a variety of edible fare, ranging from soups to desserts to baked goods.

But not every detail about the American chestnut is

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
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festive. Once a major food and timber source in the U.S., the American chestnut tree suffered a terrible loss when nearly the entire crop perished as a result of a fungus accidentally introduced from the Orient in 1904. Within 40 years, over 3.5 billion chestnuts were destroyed. Fading from our landscape for half a century, the American chestnut became nearly extinct. That is, until plant pathologists began developing blight-resistant versions of the American tree.

Thanks to the groundbreaking work of the American Chestnut Foundation, created in support of a breeding technique called backcrossing (crossing an American chestnut with a Chinese chestnut and then crossing it again with an American chestnut), it is hoped that the American chestnut tree will slowly reestablish its place in the forest. The past few decades of backcrossing have resulted in fields of blight-resistant trees with fifteen-sixteenths American heritage.

“Wide-scale plantings should begin by 2020. Meanwhile, excellent Chinese, European, and Japanese chestnut cultivars are producing nuts for the U.S. market,” says Dr. Paul Sisco, Regional Science Coordinator for The American Chestnut Foundation.

Chestnut trees can be grown in a wide variety of climates, with minimal temperatures not falling

below -25°F. They thrive in well-drained, somewhat acidic soil, with a pH ranging from 5.5 to 6.5. Seeds are planted in the spring, as soon as the ground is workable, no deeper than one inch in the ground. Trees are usually planted near each other for optimal cross-pollination conditions – about 40 feet apart – and pruned in the early summer. Once planted, a chestnut tree bears nuts in three to five years, producing 2,000-4,000 pounds per acre at maturity (about 12-15 years).

Harvested with methods similar to pecans, hazelnuts and walnuts, chestnuts are shaken from the trees and collected in nets or by hand. Because chestnuts are high in moisture, they are harvested every two to three days to prevent mold growth. Their moisture content also makes them perishable, so chestnuts should be refrigerated. In proper storage, at about 32°F, chestnuts will last for up to six months. Harvest extends for about 10 to 14 days each season.

Though not as sing-able as “chestnuts roasting on an open fire,” the easiest method of cooking chestnuts is boiling. For this method, chestnuts should be cut in half and boiled for 10 to 15 minutes. The kernels come out easily after the nuts are drained and allowed to cool. For the more traditional prep method, chestnuts can be roasted over a fire, in the microwave for about two to three minutes (cut in half), or in the oven for about 15

minutes at about 300 degrees. The shell must be punctured before cooking to allow steam to escape during the heating process. And of course, chestnuts have to be peeled before eating.

There are fewer than 500 acres of chestnut orchards in the U.S. today, so we import \$20 million worth of chestnuts annually to meet consumer demand. That's equivalent to 10,000 acres of producing chestnut orchards. The good news, however, is that we're getting there. The new American trees should be dropping their own nuts in about 12 years. Now that's something to sing about.



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