



THE
AMERICAN
CHESTNUT
FOUNDATION®

TACF Fact Sheet

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Harvesting, Handling and Storing Chestnuts: *Helpful Tips for Success*

Chestnuts are an attractive food to most anything that crawls, walks or flies. Even if your tree has never had viable nuts, blue jays and squirrels will find burs just beginning to open and steal your valuable nuts before they even hit the ground.

Harvest Early

The remedy is simple. As soon as nut-bearing burs begin to open, pick the ones you think have a nut. The seeds should be viable and will continue to ripen. (See “Bur Opening and Nut Removal” on page 2 for more information.)

Unpollinated and Pollinated Nuts

Chestnut flowers develop into burs whether the burs contain viable nuts or not. This can make it difficult to find the good ones (**Figure 1**). Burs that were not pollinated will start to open and drop nuts as much as a week before the fruitful burs, which can make harvest timing a little tricky. Luckily, when many of the unpollinated burs are opening it is then possible to spot the fruitful burs—not only will they still be closed they will also commonly be bright green, in contrast to the brownish color of the empty burs.



Figure 1: Pollinated (left) vs. unpollinated nuts (right).

Carefully open one or two fruitful burs to assess the state of the nuts. When the developing fertilized nuts begin to show brown color, the burs will start to open very soon. However, trees may start to drop nuts while they are still white. (Nuts from burs opened for inspection, even when completely white, will still germinate—save them, preferably by leaving them attached to the bur and waiting for them to color up before storage.)



Figure 2: Nearing time of harvest for chestnut burs (2A). Seam starting to show (2B). Burs have started to split. Even though nuts are still white, they may be harvested at this time.

Harvest Timing

Begin looking at the trees in early or mid-September. When nuts inside closed burs are averaging 50-80% brown, or fruitful burs are just starting to split open, start picking. Burs can be picked early, even when the seams just start to show (**Figure 2A**), though it is better to wait until the seams just start to show. The longer you wait

after seam-splitting, the more vulnerable the chestnuts are to predation by rodents and other animals.

Helpful Tips for Success

Harvesting

The smart chestnut gatherer goes to harvest wearing thick leather gloves. The bur spines can puncture skin, breaking off and, later, festering. A “fruit picker” basket on a pole will reach many burs without requiring a ladder. Line the basket with mesh, so it will not allow loose nuts from partly opened burs to fall through and be lost. A mesh bag works well for this, like the ones grocery stores use for oranges or, if you are in a coastal area, those used for lobster bait. Some nut growers suggest a long window-washing pole with a hook attached to harvest the burs (**Figure 3**). Minimize damage to the stem that holds the burs. Damage can reduce harvest in later years.

Record Keeping

Keep burs/nuts from different trees in separate labeled bags. Send records of the mother trees to your TACF state chapter contact or regional science coordinator, so their history can be followed.

Bur Opening and Nut Removal

Place the unopened burs in baggies, trash bags, bushel baskets or laundry baskets, depending on how many burs there are. Whatever the container, leave the top open to allow the burs to breathe and be sure to label the container with the source information. Be careful bags don't tip over and spill together, confusing the counts. Store the bags so they will not dry out. Look through the bags on a regular basis and remove nuts as they ripen. If the bags are stored in a cool, dark place, overhaul at least every four days; if stored in light at room temperature, overhaul at least every two days, as they will ripen (and dry) faster. If there are still unopened burs after about 10 days, you can open, or shuck, the unopened burs and the seed will usually be viable (*wear gloves!*).

Storage

If nuts are to be eaten, store fresh chestnuts in a grocery bag for up to two months. Sweeten fresh chestnuts by leaving them at room temperature for two days (starches will convert to sugar). For longer storage, put in freezer and use immediately after thawing (else they will become mushy).

If saving the nuts for planting, place them in damp (NOT WET!) peat moss as soon as they are removed from the burs. The peat moss should be damp enough that you can squeeze it into a ball but not so damp you can squeeze water out of it. Get an even distribution of nuts within the peat. It is very important to use sterile peat, not potting mix or other dense media. Not using sterile peat will encourage the proliferation of mold, as will having peat moss that is too wet. Place the nuts and peat in a plastic bag or Tupperware container that has been punched with holes. This allows the nuts to breathe and reduces molding. Be sure to label the bags with the number of nuts contained in the bag and the mother tree and/or cross information. At this point, you should ship them to your TACF state chapter contact or regional science coordinator for storage, or store the nuts yourself in the refrigerator. The ideal storage temperature for chestnuts is approximately 34°F, and even at this cold temperature the nuts will probably sprout by late winter or early spring. Do not freeze chestnuts, as extended freezing will reduce the chances of successful germination after planting.



Figure 3: Pole with hook; a useful tool to use when harvesting.