Castanea sativa (Sweet chestnut)

Once again, we would like to close the year with a description of a beautiful botanical variety. This year we have chosen Castanea sativa. The tree is native to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea region. The tree often grows in Mediterranean oak woods and prefers limestone-free soil.

Castanea sativa is known to have been spread throughout Europe by the Romans who planted numerous chestnut trees in order to produce food for their legions. Recent research has shown that the Celts already spread the tree in Northern Europe 200 years before Christ. It was found that the tree thrived in warmer regions of the Rhine Valley.

It is most likely that the tree has the Greek word Kastania to thank for its botanical generic name Castanea. This Greek name is derived from a language related to Greek, from the region of Armenia. There are at least 10 villages in Greece that are called Kastania and the villages are most probably named after the tree. The name of the variety, sativa, means ‘cultivated’. In Dutch, the word ‘tam’, from ‘Tamme castanea’, means the same: tamed, cultivated and therefore edible.

From the Middle Ages onwards, many sweet chestnuts were planted in monastery gardens and on estates. Many monumental examples of the tree can be found on the Nijmegen Heuvelrug, in the region of Arnhem and in various places in the province of Limburg. In the Netherlands, the tree only reaches a height of 25 metres in elevated sandy areas where it feels most at home.
Very large specimens of *Castanea sativa* can be found in Southern England but the most well-known chestnut tree is located on the slopes of the Etna volcano on Sicily. This world-famous chestnut tree with the name: Chestnut Tree of One Hundred Horses (‘Castagno dei 100 cavalli’) is located a mere eight kilometres from Etna’s crater. Currently, the tree consists of three trees, or trunks, with a diameter of 13, 20 and 22 metres and is thought to date back centuries. The literature suggests that it already existed before the beginning of our era.

In summer, *Castanea sativa* is clearly recognisable by its long, coarsely serrated, oblong-lanceolate leaves. The white, fragrant male flowers appear on the tree in spring as 13 cm long, striking and elegant catkins. In autumn, the typical cupules, spiky sheaths usually containing two to four edible chestnuts, appear. Sweet chestnuts can be eaten raw when they fall from the trees in October. In many Central and Southern European countries, roasted chestnuts are sold at little stalls on the streets. The photos showing chestnuts being sold in the city were taken in Lisbon.

A well-known cultivar is *Castanea sativa ‘Lyon’*, which is smaller than *Castanea sativa*. The crown has a more irregular shape and the chestnuts are often shinier. The horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) and the sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) are often confused with one another. However, the seeds of the horse chestnut are inedible and the tree belongs to a different family of plants. The cupules have much fewer and shorter spikes.

*Castanea sativa* is very suitable for planting in green spaces, in parks or on estates. Because it bears fruits, it is less suitable for planting in streets or on squares.

We would like to end with a description of the monumental sweet chestnut tree in Vlodrop in Limburg, and a recipe for roasting chestnuts:

### The ‘Oude Dame (Old Lady) Castanea sativa’ who saw everything – Vlodrop, Limburg

She stands in the parish of Vlodrop, in Limburg, a sweet chestnut, tall and gracious. The proud diva that bears numerous fruits each year has a waist of no less than 575 cm wide. She has high foliage with a crown of branches that reach the ground. It is most likely that she was planted in 1664 by the former owner of the Steenen Huys, Gerard Bordels, mayor of Roermond.


### Instructions for roasting of chestnuts

1. Remove the chestnuts from their cupule.
2. Each cupule usually contains several chestnuts.
3. Score a cross in the top of the sweet chestnuts

4a. Place the chestnuts on the grill in a fireproof BBQ tray or directly on the grill of the BBQ.

4b. The chestnuts can also be roasted in the oven. Don’t forget to score them because if you don’t, they will explode. Scoring them prevents this. Heat the oven up to 200 degrees.

Ingredients

- Sweet chestnuts
- A knob of butter if desired
- A pinch of salt if desired

We wish you and your family a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year!

Let the chestnuts pop …

See you in 2020!

M. van den Oever Nurseries Team

Flowers and fruits
Castanea sativa in Haaren
Your access to 12,000 varieties | Castanea sativa (Sweet chestnut)