

Tale from the Garden

I was so impressed by Rev Andrew's baby Horse Chestnut tree which he brought to our Harvest Festival last week, that this impressive tree just had to be the star of the show this week!

Spiky cases, gleaming seeds, celebrated by children, Horse Chestnuts, with their mahogany-bright conkers, are the very essence of autumn. Autumn is well on its way and soon enough, kids everywhere will begin preparing for conker championships.

Quick facts

Common name: horse chestnut

Scientific name: *Aesculus hippocastanum*

Family: Hippocastanaceae

Origin: non-native

Through the seasons - Mature horse chestnut trees grow to a height of around 40m and can live for up to 300 years! The bark is smooth and pinky-grey when young, which darkens and develops scaly plates with age. Twigs are hairless and stout; buds are oval, dark red, shiny and sticky; the palmate leaves comprise 5-7 pointed, toothed leaflets spreading from a central stem; appearing in May, individual flowers have 4-5 fringed petals, which are white with a pink flush at the base; once pollinated by insects, each flower develops into a glossy red-brown conker inside a spiky green husk, which falls in autumn.

The Horse Chestnut is native to the Balkan Peninsula. It was first introduced to the UK from Turkey in the late 16th century and widely planted. Though rarely found in woodland, it is a common sight in parks, gardens, streets and on village greens. In Stokesley, there are some whoppers on Tanton Road & by the River Leven near Millbry Hill.



Horse chestnut tree

Value to wildlife

The flowers provide a rich source of nectar and pollen for insects, particularly bees. Caterpillars of the triangle moth feed on its leaves, as does the horse chestnut leaf-miner moth whose caterpillars provide food for blue tits. Deer and other mammals eat the conkers.

Mythology and symbolism

There is little British folklore associated with the tree – probably due to it being an introduced species. The most famous use of horse chestnut is in the game of conkers. The first record of the game is from the Isle of Wight in 1848. Games of conkers have different rules in different parts of the country and have their own jargon which often requires repeating rhymes or rituals to decide who goes first.

Did you know?

The leaf stalks leave a scar on the twig when they fall, which resembles an inverted horse-shoe with nail holes. This association with horses could explain why conkers used to be ground up and fed to horses to relieve them of coughs and could be the origin of the tree's name.

TOP SIX FACTS!

1. Conkers might not repel spiders

Unfortunately, there's no proof this is true. The story goes that conkers contain a noxious chemical that repels spiders but no-one's ever been able to scientifically prove it. There's hearsay that if a spider gets close to a conker it will curl its legs up and die within one day.

Others say spiders will happily crawl over conkers with no ill effects at all. Plenty of people swear by conkers for spider control, what do you think?

2. Conkers can help fix sprains and bruises

It is said that the Horse Chestnut is so named because its seeds were once used to treat ailments in horses. It turns out that aescin, which can be extracted from conkers, has anti-inflammatory effects and is an effective remedy for sprains and bruises for humans.

3. The Victorians baked with conker flour

The Victorians wrote recipes for making conker flour. The seeds were shelled, ground and then leached to remove bitter flavours. It's not a common practice these days because conkers are mildly poisonous, so we can't imagine Conker Bread Week on the Great British Bake Off. We recommend sticking to self-raising!

4. Conkers in your wardrobe could help deter moths

If moths are munching their way through your winter wardrobe then conkers could be the answer. The horse chestnut seeds contain a chemical called triterpenoid saponin that wards off pesky pests. Place fresh conkers in among your clothes and as they dry out they emit the moth-repellent.

5. You can get clean with horse chestnut soap

The saponins in conkers are soap-like chemicals that are sometimes added to shampoos and shower gels. It is thought that the Vikings, who were apparently surprisingly clean, made their soap out of soaked, crushed up conkers. We might give this one a go!

6. Conkers make great arts and crafts materials

Conkers are loved by children and eagerly collected for conker games in autumn, but they have endless arty potential too. A favourite craft is to make a doll's house chair. Simply collect the shiniest conkers you can find and then carefully stick 4 toothpicks underneath to make legs and an arc of toothpicks around the top to create a chair back. Weave wool in and out of the arc of toothpicks and hey presto; a beautiful doll-sized chair! What other ideas can you come up with?

Horse chestnut timber is a pale creamy-white to light brown, with a smooth, soft, fine texture. It's not very strong and is therefore not used commercially, but its soft texture makes it ideal for carving.

Conkers & Conquerors

Do you remember playing the game "conkers"? It is an old game that our fathers and grandfathers may have played. Your grandfather probably played it with chestnuts. But it can also be played with any kind of a nut - walnut, almond, or even a buckeye or a horse chestnut.

To play the game you look for the biggest, hardest nut you can find. Then you drill a small hole through it, pass a string through the hole, and tie a knot at the end so that the nut doesn't slip off. The string should be about two feet long and is used to swing the nut. The object of the game is to give someone else's nut a good "conk" to see if you can break it. If you can, then your "conker" is the winner.

Here's a story:

Freddy loved to play conkers. He was always looking for the biggest, strongest horse chestnut he could find. He had one old "champ" which had won many games of conkers. He always carried that one with him, especially when he went to school.

One day during class, Freddy was thinking about conkers. He was a Christian and knew he should have been paying attention to what the teacher was saying, but he wasn't. Instead, every chance he got, when the teacher wasn't looking, he was challenging all the boys within whispering distance to a battle of conkers after school.

A knock on the door and a message was delivered to their teacher, Mr. Parker, asking him to come to the office for a few minutes. As he left he instructed the class to continue working on their maths problem until he came back.

The door had barely closed behind Mr. Parker before a dozen conkers were taken out of a dozen pockets, all on strings, ready for action.

Whack, whack, crack! Freddy's "champ" was still undefeated, and pieces of chestnuts soon were flying all over the room.

"Psssst!" someone warned. Conkers and strings disappeared into pockets, and a dive was made for the broken pieces. Then all heads were bent over math books again as Mr. Parker walked back in.

Walking up to the front of the room, Mr. Parker noticed a broken horse chestnut on the floor that had not been picked up. Looking around the class, he asked, "Did any of you play conkers while I was gone? You all know there is a school rule that doesn't allow that game to be played at school, inside or out. It can be a dangerous game, because flying pieces of nuts can easily put out someone's eye."

Freddy had not thought about that before. They really did swing their conkers hard. Sometimes they would get hit on the hand, and he knew how that stung. But he never thought about getting hit in the eye.

No one answered the teacher's question; everyone just kept quiet.

Freddy was fighting a battle inside. He knew that it was wrong not to admit that he had been playing. But he also knew what the other boys would think, and he didn't want to "squeal" on them either. Freddy had become a Christian when he made the decision to follow Jesus and had accepted Him as his Saviour. The battle that was going on inside of him was between "old Freddy" who said, "Don't admit anything," and "new Freddy" who said, "Keeping quiet is the same as telling a lie." Every Christian has been through this battle between their "old nature," which Satan rules, and their "new nature" which God rules. The "old nature," tells us to forget about God and His Son, the Lord Jesus, and what pleases Him, and the "new nature," which each person receives the moment he becomes a Christian, tells us to do what is right and honest and would please God.

Satan had won when he had gotten Freddy not to pay attention in class. And, as usually happens, one sin leads to another. Satan had a second victory when Freddy played conkers during school, breaking the rule. Now Satan was trying for a third victory by making him want to tell a lie.

Mr. Parker had been a schoolboy himself once. They weren't fooling him. Without saying another word he went to the blackboard and wrote: **'CONKER' 'CONQUER' 'CONQUEROR'**. Then turning around, he asked, "Are any of you going to let yourself be beaten by a little chestnut?"

Freddy knew what Mr. Parker meant... was a chestnut going to make him tell a lie? He knew deep inside that all the games he had won with his champion conker were not worth disobeying God by not telling the truth. He would probably lose his "champ," but he didn't want to tell a lie by keeping quiet.

"Mr. Parker," he said, raising his hand and at the same time feeling his face turning red, "I played with my conker while you were gone."

"Bring me your conker, Fred" Mr. Parker said firmly.

Freddy sadly obeyed, handing over his "champ" with its string.

"Thank you," said the teacher, "Okay, boys, the game of conkers is not played by only one person. Some of you other boys were also playing in here this afternoon, but none of you have the courage to admit it. All the boys in this class, except Fred, will get extra homework tonight!"

Even though Freddy knew he was going to "hear it" from the other boys, he was relieved that he had spoken up, not only because he wouldn't have extra homework, but mostly because he had told the truth. He had obeyed his "new nature" and had been honest.

How happy we will be when we admit to God that we often get things wrong, and when we ask Him to save us from your sins. In the Bible, Paul writes: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10 v9). God has provided a way for each of us to be saved from our sins. Freddy had accepted that way, and God had helped him win his battle.

We can have that help too when we accept the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. But even more important, we will know that our sins are forgiven, and that we are on our way to heaven.

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10 v27-28).