

4 Horse chestnut *Aesculus hippocastanum*

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.

Look out for: conkers (seeds) which are surrounded by a spiky green case. Distinctive large leaves have serrated leaflets.

Did you know?

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. The traditional game of conkers was first recorded on the Isle of Wight in 1848. To select the hardest conkers place them in a bowl of water. The best ones will sink, showing they're solid and firm.

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.

Uses of Horse Chestnut.

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.

Other uses of the conkers include horse medicines, as additives in shampoos, and as a starch substitute. Chemicals extracted from conkers can be used to treat strains and bruises. There's hearsay that if you place conkers around your house it will keep spiders away, but there's no scientific proof that this is the case.

