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Chestnuts — A heritage saved

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: The 4,000-year-old “Hundred Horse Chestnut” of Sicily in a 1777 painting by Jean-Pierre Houël. (Courtesy photo)

What heritage tree can feed generations of humans and beasts while providing one of the finest rot-resistant woods? Regular readers may have learned of the oak’s traditional role, but a more obvious candidate is the chestnut.

It would be impossible to enumerate the billions sustained by the nuts, comparable in nutrition to brown rice. And before the 20th century it was the wood of choice for telegraph poles, railroad ties, caskets, houses and barns. The wood is incorruptible, beautiful, and strong enough to support crowns so large that in France four of them can dominate an acre.

The spreading canopy of the *Castanea* genus has been venerated for thousands of years as it offers shade and rains manna. In Sicily one chestnut estimated at 4,000 years old was large enough in the 15th century to shelter a princess and 100 of her mounted knights.

This “hundred-horse chestnut” is an example of trees we in the United States could admire today, and we might enjoy traditional chestnut foods of the Americas like the Cherokees’ chestnut bread. But the blight that arrived from Asia circa 1900 wiped out over 4 billion trees in the eastern U.S. alone. That’s 25% of the region’s forest.

Blight-resistant Asian trees have helped the restoration of chestnuts as they are hybridized with European and American varieties. Some breeders have put in the time to produce trees with 15/16 American genetics!

Though this work has been underway in earnest for decades, it is yet easier for us in regions sparsely-blighted to raise chestnuts with some confidence in their longevity. The Olympic Peninsula has not been a blight hotspot, still nurseries wisely concentrate on blight-resistant hybrids.

I didn’t understand why anyone would bother to grow chestnuts as a staple food — as opposed to delicacies like France’s marron glacé — until I tasted some hybrids from Oregon. I could understand how they make a loaf similar to cornbread. The sturdy flour has stayed fresh as long as two years.

They were delicious enough to eat roasted and richly sweetened a stuffing, nothing like Daniel Handler’s observation that “chestnuts in stuffing tastes like someone chewed up a tree branch and then

French-kissed it into your mouth.”

This might be true of the Chinese and Korean varieties often sold in Asian grocers. Asia has many unique species, but many commercial varieties are drier and less flavorful than the species of Europe and the United States. And yet China harvests 10 times more chestnuts than the world’s second-biggest producer, Korea.

We in the South Sound are lucky to have one of the nation’s best commercial chestnut propagators within driving distance. Burnt Ridge Nursery has been working with chestnuts in our climate for over 20 years, and theirs are impressive to behold. Picking up stock from the Olympia Farmers Market is a great way to avoid the astronomical shipping costs attendant on trees.

Because chestnuts prefer well-drained acidic soil, last fall I planted some in silty loam and some in a more sandy area. Sterile pollen varieties (like California’s reliable “Colossal”), valued for heavier production, were placed 35’ apart downwind from pollinating varieties like the French cultivar Belle Epine. Those in the loam have tolerated summer dryness better, but may not have rooted as deeply as those in the sand.

Burnt Ridge’s Michael Dolan told me that chestnuts are excellent for soil stabilization, but those I planted in sandier soil have suffered heat stress and leaf drop in our Mediterranean summer. I’ll be eager to see whether they leaf out in their second spring, because I’ve mixed them in plantings with oak to prevent erosion and build soil.

The happiest chestnuts so far flowered in silty loam. I briefly hoped for chestnuts within a year of planting! Keeping in mind the maxim about trees: “the first year they sleep, the second they creep, the third they leap,” I thought I might set a record with yields from these 6’ tall bareroot tree-tweens. For all the flowering, the two trees that bore yielded two nuts apiece, each barely the size of a walnut – husk included.

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