Usually, when people use the phrase "a horse of a different color," they are not speaking of horses but of something entirely different. Such a phrase was supposedly coined by Shakespeare when he wrote "a horse of that color" (Twelfth Night 2:3), meaning "the same matter." Conversely, by the mid-1800s, the expression was used to point out differences rather than likenesses.

Interestingly, this past week I actually did see a horse of a different color; one I’ve never seen before. Over the years I’ve seen white ones and tan ones, but this was the first time I saw a red one. Trust me, it was a sight to behold. So beautiful was this horse that I felt compelled to write about it. Perhaps, after reading this article and viewing the pictures, you might even consider owning one of these horses.

The horse’s name is ‘Briotii’. ‘Briotii’ is not of the genus Equus; rather it belongs to the genus Aesculus. The fact is ‘Briotii’ is actually a hybrid cross between Aesculus pavia and Aesculus hippocastanum. By now you’ve realized I’m not really writing about the animal we call a horse; rather, I’m writing about a tree commonly called Red Horse Chestnut.

Aesculus x carnea ‘Briotii’ was discovered in Europe in 1812. ‘Briotii’ is a cultivar named in 1858 to honor Pierre Louis Briot, the nurseryman at Trianon-Versailles near Paris, France.

‘Briotii’ serves as a perfect, landscape specimen and/or shade tree. This deciduous tree
is capable of reaching heights of thirty to forty feet at maturity. Pyramidal in shape when very young, Red Horse Chestnut develops slowly into a round, very dense shade tree in five to seven years. Its greatest attributes are the multitude of showy, dark red, upright flowers six to eight inches long that appear in mid-spring. Later in the growing season, the red flowers are replaced by prickly capsules containing two or three nuts.

Another attractive feature of this tree is its handsome dark green compound leaves with five to seven spreading oblong leaflets six to ten inches long. Each leaflet has toothed margins. Unfortunately, fall foliage in Red Horse Chestnut is drab and non-descript.

‘Briotii’ is capable of growing in Central Nebraska. Hardy from Zone 5 to Zone 8, it is easily grown in well-drained soil with average moisture. It performs well in full sun to part shade. Because it prefers moist soil, sometimes the foliage will scorch in dry conditions. Red Horse Chestnut develops a tap root; thus, once established, it becomes difficult to transplant.

As mentioned earlier, the beautiful red flowers give rise to prickly seed pods which contain two to three viable nuts capable of producing offspring that grow true from seed. Although a chestnut tree, the seeds of Red Horse Chestnut are not edible. They are actually poisonous. The tree has few disease or insect problems. Scorching of leaves during hot weather is its main weakness.

Although ‘Briotii’ is the most popular cultivar of Red Horse Chestnut, other cultivars such as ‘O’Neill’ and ‘Fort McNair’ exist. From my research I discovered ‘O’Neill’ is rarely available but purported to have flowers in foot-long panicles that are an even deeper red than ‘Briotii’. ‘Fort McNair’ flowers are pink with yellow throats.
‘Briotii’ is certainly a horse of a different color—horse chestnut that is. I’m convinced most homeowners would enjoy having one in their landscapes. I know I would; but, unfortunately, I’m out of room.