

Of late, I am reminded of an early 1960s television comedy that featured a talking horse. Coincidentally, the title of the show and the horse's name were one and the same — *Mr. Ed*. Each episode opened with the same catchy tune. As often happens to me, a recent encounter caused me to recall that tune, which has been replaying in my head ever since. As usual, I came up with my own version.

A horse is a horse, of course, of course and my name's Mister Ted.
Everyone knows no one can talk to horse of course, of course,
Unless the horse is the famous Mister Ed.
However, this story's not about a talking horse of course, of course,
Rather a horse chestnut tree instead.

I recently witnessed the magnificent autumn splendor of a small tree growing in my neighborhood. After marveling at its beauty, I began to question. "How did this tree get such a strange common name? Why do I not see more of them growing here in Central Nebraska? Is it one that I would recommend?"

The tree is a horse chestnut, sometimes referred to as Spanish chestnut and even mistakenly called a buckeye. Although closely related and similar in many ways, the true buckeye, Ohio's state tree, is scientifically known as *Aesculus glabra*; whereas, the standard horse chestnut tree is *Aesculus hippocastanum*.



Working at Extension, I have long been familiar with the word hippology. In 4-H, it is the name used for the study of horses, and interestingly, hippo is of Greek origin and means *horse*. That, in itself, should be enough to understand why it is called horse chestnut.

However, digging deeper, I discovered the most discerning feature is located on the twigs of this tree. When this tree loses its leaves in the fall, like all deciduous trees, a leaf scar remains. Taxonomists

(botanists who specialize in classifying and naming plants) visualize these leaf scars as horseshoes complete with seven nails. And you think I have a vivid imagination,

Furthermore, the nut-like seeds of this tree, called conkers, were long ago referred to as horse chestnuts. Supposedly, in early times, the nuts were fed to horses having bronchial or chest problems. Although true chestnuts are edible, horse chestnuts, as well as buckeyes, are highly poisonous and contain the toxin aesculin.

The true horse chestnut tree is indigenous to the Balkan regions of southeastern Europe. Carried to the new world by colonists, today horse chestnuts are found growing throughout the northern United States.



This tree has many positive attributes. Horse chestnut is widely grown as an ornamental shade tree. At maturity, it is capable of reaching eighty feet but it usually grows to about fifty feet with an equal size in spread. Its large, attractive, palmate compound leaves consist of five to seven leaflets joined in the center. In the spring, horse chestnut trees display beautiful white and sometimes pinkish-red clusters of five-to-twelve-inch-long flower spikes. Following pollination, seed nuts are produced inside attractive, spiny, leathery shells that later split open in the fall revealing the shiny brown seeds frequently called buckeyes. Early to lose its leaves, autumn foliage can be attractive in shades of red and yellow. Horse chestnut tolerates many soil types and grows well in full sun to partial shade. It prefers moist, well-drained soil and is hardy in Zones 3 through 7.



Although attractive and unusual, the horse chestnut tree is not for everyone. Due to its large mature size, it is best suited for bigger areas, including parks and public grounds. Horse chestnut trees litter the lawn annually with their many

seedpods that can be thrown forcefully by lawnmowers. In addition, as stated before, if eaten, the nuts of this tree are poisonous and cause gastrointestinal problems for humans and livestock. Horse chestnut cannot tolerate hot weather or soils that remain dry for long periods. In high heat, the leaves can easily burn, dropping prematurely before autumn.

In closing, I leave you with this thought.

A horse chestnut is certainly not a horse of course;
Nor can it talk like Mister Ed,
But it's a beautiful tree for all to see,
And recommended by Mister Ted.