

Harvesting, Handling and Shipping Chestnuts



Harvest is as critical as any other part of the yearly chestnut process. Chestnuts are eaten by everything that crawls, walks, and flies—as soon as the bur opens. Even if your tree has never had viable nuts before, bluejays and squirrels will find the opening burs immediately and steal your valuable nuts before they even hit the ground.

Harvest The Entire tree. The remedy is simple—as soon as nut-bearing burs just begin to open, pick all the burs which may possibly have a nut inside. The seeds will be viable.

Pollinated and Unpollinated Nuts. Chestnut trees develop burs whether they contain good nuts or not, which makes it difficult to find the good ones. Burs which have not been pollinated will start to open and drop as much as 2 weeks before the fruitful burs. When many of the empty burs are opening it is then possible to spot the fruitful burs—they will not only be closed but will also commonly still be bright green, in contrast to the brownish color of the empty burs.

The state of the fruitful burs can be assessed by opening one or two (if there are many available to work with). When the developing fertilized nuts begin to show brown color, the burs will start to open very soon. However, trees may start to drop nuts while they are still white. (Nuts from burs opened for inspection, even when completely white, will germinate if not damaged—save them, preferably by leaving them attached to the bur and waiting for them to color up before storage.)



Harvest Timing. Start looking at the trees in early or mid-September. When nuts inside closed burs are averaging 50-80% brown, or fruitful burs are just starting to split open, start picking.

Record Keeping. Be sure to keep burs from different trees in separate labeled bags. Some or most of your nuts will be used for breeding when the mother tree is gone. Nuts carry hidden genetic information for generations. Be sure to send in records of the mother trees, so their history can be followed further.

Harvesting. The smart chestnut gatherer goes to harvest wearing thick leather gloves. The bur spines can puncture skin, breaking off and, later, festering. A fruit picker's basket on a pole will reach many burs without requiring a ladder. Line the basket with mesh, so it will not allow loose nuts from partly opened burs to fall through and be lost. A net bag like those grocery stores use for oranges works well. Some nut growers suggest a long window washing pole with a hook attached to harvest the burs.

Bur Opening or Removal. Use baggies, trash bags, bushel baskets, grain bags, etc., depending on how many burs there are; leave the tops open to allow the burs to breathe. Be careful bags don't tip over and spill together, confusing the counts. Store the bags so they will not dry out. The burs generate a lot of moisture; be sure to allow it to escape. Overhaul the bags on a regular basis and remove nuts as they ripen. If the bags are stored in a cool, dark place, overhaul at least every four days; if stored in light at room temperature, overhaul at least every two days, as they will ripen (and dry) faster. Using heavy gloves (thick leather or coated latex/nitrile/rubber), you can open or shuck the unopened burs and the seed will usually be viable.

Processing and Mailing Nuts. Mix the nuts with fresh, damp (NOT WET!!) peat moss. Keep the nuts in a refrigerator in a plastic bag that has been punched with holes. This allows the nuts to breathe and reduces molding. **PLEASE LABEL THE BAGS PROPERLY!!!** Mail to PA-TACF as soon as possible, within two or three weeks, in these bags. Include the records and location of each tree.