

The American Chestnut Foundation

Chestnut Harvest & Storage

Harvest is a critical time for chestnut growers. These valuable nuts are eaten by everything that crawls, walks, and flies—as soon as the bur opens. Be sure to get there first!

Early Observation and Harvest

To outcompete the squirrels and blue jays, early observation and harvest is the solution. As soon as nut-bearing burs begin to open (Figure 3), pick all the burs which may possibly have a nut inside. .

Burs which have not been pollinated will start to open and drop as much as a week before the fruitful burs. When many of the empty burs are opening, it is a good time 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.

Starting in early September, begin checking your trees for this early nut drop. When you observe the nuts inside closed burs are averaging 50-80% brown, or fruitful burs are just starting to split open, start picking.

Burs can be picked early, even when the seams just start to show (Figure 3A), though it is better to wait until just when the seams have split (Figure 3B). Waiting beyond seam splitting leaves the nuts vulnerable to predation by rodents and other animals.

Identifying Pollinated Nuts

Chestnut trees develop burs whether they contain good nuts or not, which makes it difficult to find the good nuts.

The state of the fruitful burs can be assessed by opening one or two. See Figure 1 on this page for examples of pollinated versus unpollinated nuts.

Burs can be picked early, even when the seams just start to show (Figure 3A), though it is better to wait until just when the seams have split (Figure 3B). When the developing nuts begin to show brown color, the burs will start to open very soon. However, trees may be harvested while the nuts are still white.

Note: 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 winter storage.



Figure 1: Pollinated versus unpollinated nuts

Harvesting Tips

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” 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 (Figure 2). Try not to remove or damage the stem on which the burs are held. This can reduce harvest in the next year or even two years.



Figure 2. Pole with a hook on it - a very useful tool to use when harvesting.

Note: Removing or damaging the stem that holds the burs may reduce harvest in the next year or even two years.



Figure 3. Nearing time of harvest for chestnut burs. 3A. Seam starting to show. 3B. Burs have started to split. Though nuts are still white, they may be harvested at this time.

Keep Detailed Records

When using nuts for planting, be sure to keep burs from different trees in separate labeled bags. Send records of the mother trees to your TACF chapter's regional science coordinator, so their history can be tracked over time .

Storing Burs until Shucking

Try to shuck nuts out of burs as soon as possible. Harvested burs can be stored in plastic bags, bushel baskets or other containers allowing for ventilation. The stored burs will generate 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 these will ripen (and dry) faster. Using heavy gloves, you can open or shuck the unopened burs and the seed will usually be viable.

Storing Nuts for Planting

- Once removed from burs, immediately place nuts in damp peat moss to keep them viable. *You should be able to squeeze the peat into a ball, but not squeeze water out of it.* **Use only sterile peat moss to prevent damaging mold.** Create an even distribution of nuts within the peat.
- Place the nuts and peat in a plastic bags or plastic containers that have been punched with holes to allow ventilation and reduce the risk of mold by limiting moisture retention.
- Label the bags with the number of nuts and the identity of the mother tree and/or cross from which the nuts were harvested.
- The ideal storage temperature for chestnuts is approximately 34°F, and even at this cold temperature the nuts will probably sprout by late winter or early spring.

Shipping Instructions: Only ship nuts from trees which have been verified through the Chapter's Tree Locator Program. Ship as soon as possible (address below) within two or three weeks, in labeled bags. Include the records and location of each tree. Mark perishable.

*Penn State University
108 Business Services
206 Forest Resource Lab
University Park, PA 16802*

