



## Plants & Children

The people's choice

Horse chestnut

*Aesculus hippocastanum*

### Why it was chosen

The horse chestnut's spiky fruits contain large brown seeds, or 'conkers'.

The first recorded game of conkers was in 1848 and it has been an autumn tradition and playground favourite ever since.

The World Conker Championships are held in Northamptonshire every year.

### What it is

Horse chestnut is one of the largest flowering trees of the temperate world. The horse chestnut flower is pollinated by insects rather than wind, unlike most other British trees.

The large leaves have five or six leaflets spreading out like fingers, when these fall, they leave horseshoe-shaped scars on the branches.

### Where it grows

Horse chestnut is native to Asia and northern Greece, but it is now cultivated in many areas of Europe and North America. It is planted in parks and hedges rather than woodland.

A new, fruitless variety is being grown as some people prize the flowers, but do not want children damaging the tree while trying to dislodge the conkers.

### Did you know?

Conkers were once used to make explosives! During the First World War children collected thousands of conkers and sent them to be used to produce acetone, essential in making cordite, a smokeless gunpowder used in shells.

### What the scientists say

The conker's 'flesh' is mostly starch. Humans have been using starch for thousands of years in many different ways. Scientists have been studying the structure of starch and how it is made in the plant so as to produce new kinds of starches. These special starches can replace many plastic products, such as polystyrene, that would normally be made from fossil fuels.

**Plants  
& Us**