

Delmarvelous Farms Chestnuts - History and Marketing

The history of chestnuts reveals important information about the crop and potential growers; get some marketing ideas, too

(from "Delmarvelous Farms Chestnuts," by Kimberly Button)

The Chestnut's Claim to Fame

Anyone who has ever eaten a chestnut purchased at a supermarket might be wondering what all the fuss is about.

Chestnuts from the grocery store have earned a bad reputation for their difficulty to peel and their less-than-fresh taste. According to Nancy Petitt, these storebought holiday "delicacies" are giving the entire industry a bad name.

"The chestnuts in supermarkets are imported and have an inner skin that sticks to the cracks in the nuts when you cook them," she says. "When people buy chestnuts at the supermarket and they don't peel well, it sours them on the whole experience."

Though chestnuts are harvested in late summer and early fall, their distinction as a holiday food creates a challenge in supplying decent-tasting chestnuts.

"Most supermarkets don't think about chestnuts until after Halloween; they're put on the shelves along with walnuts and pecans, and they start deteriorating until they're only marginally edible. Chestnuts need to be treated like fresh produce and kept cold right after harvest," Petitt says.

In fact, Delmarvelous Chestnuts are refrigerated immediately after harvest and are kept refrigerated in individual packing boxes until they're ready to be driven to the post office to be shipped to customers.

Though there might be some consumers turning up their noses at chestnuts because of bad supermarket experiences, there is a contingent of chestnut fans who know the well-kept secret of just how delectable a homegrown chestnut can taste.

Each year they fight for the honor of receiving a shipment of Delmarvelous Chestnuts, reputedly some of the best in the country.

"A lot of our sales are going into the South and the Southwest because people from the Northeast who are familiar with chestnuts have moved to those areas," says Petitt. "Also, a lot of older people who are familiar with chestnuts call us with orders because our chestnuts are so good."

Though the older generation might not need any encouragement to order a shipment of fresh-from-the-farm chestnuts, a new generation is discovering the taste of quality chestnuts for the first time, thanks in part to word of mouth as well as to the Food Network's television show "Food Finds," which featured Delmarvelous Chestnuts in 2006. The show continues to be broadcast each holiday season.

"Demand is so huge that customers want them as soon as they're ready," says Petitt. "They start trying to call in July and August to get their order in ahead of time and in front of the others. We don't start taking orders until September and as soon as our first newsletter goes out announcing that we're taking orders, we sell out fairly quickly. Every year we have customers who are disappointed. People start thinking about chestnuts around Thanksgiving and it's too late—by that time we're sold out."

For those who are new to chestnuts, you might be surprised to discover that a roasted chestnut doesn't really taste like a typical nut such as a peanut, pecan or almond.

"The first time people try a hot chestnut, I try to tell them to think of a sweet potato because it tastes like a nutty piece of rice," Petitt explains.

Not only do chestnuts taste similar to brown rice, their nutritional value is also somewhat the same, with a low fat and oil content not typically found in most nuts. The sweet carbohydrates found in chestnuts make them a lot more versatile to cook with than other nuts, according to Petitt.

She suggests using them as you would a fresh vegetable, mashed to a purée or ground into flour. In fact, chestnuts are a wonderful food for people whose diet might be limited by lifestyle choices or medical concerns.

Vegans and vegetarians greatly benefit from the nutrients found in the nut, while people who need a gluten-free diet can replace wheat flour with chestnut flour for baking.

In fact, the United States might be one of the few countries that hasn't embraced chestnuts as a dietary staple, according to Petitt.

"Most of the world looks at chestnuts the way America looks at potatoes," she says. "Chestnuts are an everyday part of the diet everywhere else, but not in America because we lost our trees to chestnut blight. Most people in America have never really had good chestnuts."

Though the demand for Delmarvelous Chestnuts is rapidly increasing, the Petitts don't have plans to add more acres of trees to the farm.

"We're supposed to be retired!" Petitt says with a laugh. While the Petitts have enjoyed an immense amount of success and finding customers to buy their product is no longer a concern, the couple still puts in long hours on the farm during harvest season and while preparing chestnuts for shipping.

"We work a year's worth of hours during the chestnut season. In zone 7, our harvest is usually around July 15 to October 15. We harvest naturally and let the nuts ripen on the tree and drop to the ground," Petitt says. "We're probably the biggest Internet retailer; from September to Christmas, the days are long because there's always a lot of e-mails to deal with on the administrative end trying to keep customer's orders straight."

For now, chestnut fans across America will have to wage battle against one another for the small supply of fresh, easy-to-peel, American-Chinese hybrid chestnuts that are grown in the United States.

According to Petitt, there are only a handful of small farms that currently grow chestnuts for the public. She readily admits that chestnuts would be a great addition to an existing farm or would be a perfect farm business to start on your own.

Marketing Chestnuts

"Chestnuts are great for a CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] operation," Petitt says. "They're good for anyone doing a farm-market operation where you're selling from the farm. There's a lot of value in adding chestnuts to your overall farm plan. It can be a powerful tool to extend the season and increase profitability at a time when things are usually dying."

Petitt is also quick to point out an industry that could quickly become one of a farm's biggest clients.

"For anyone who is a Christmas tree operator, chestnuts are definitely a value-added aspect: think of searching for a Christmas tree and then being able to roast chestnuts on an open fire. A handful of chestnuts are selling for three to four dollars, which is a great profit, and you're creating new memories and increasing the likelihood that people will come back to your farm. Adding chestnuts would be a natural extension of the marketing plan," she says.

Though supplying Christmas tree operators with fresh chestnuts is something that Petitt would love to do, it simply isn't feasible.

"We supply chestnuts to a hotel in Ocean City, Md., that takes guests to a national wildlife preserve and the hotel personnel roast the chestnuts on the beach while the guests watch wildlife," she says. "They were one of our first clients so we'll continue to supply chestnuts to them, but we have more customers than we can supply right now."

Petitt has also forgone frequent appearances at farmers' markets and chestnut roasting demonstrations during the holidays because "the business has exploded to the point that we can't do a lot of things anymore."

If the level of Delmarvelous Farm's success has piqued your interest in growing your own chestnuts, whether for personal pleasure or for a farming business, Petitt has a few tips to keep in mind:

"If you're looking for something to sell to the general public, peel-ability is a really huge consumer issue. Chinese or Chinese-American chestnuts are suggested," Petitt says.

Though the eastern half of the United States was the worst hit during the chestnut blight, Petitt says it's easy for people in

the East to get chestnut trees to grow on their land. However, you must be sure to get a chestnut tree that is blight resistant—one of the keys to the Petitts' success.

"Two miles down the road from us, there's chestnut blight," Petitt says. "Because our trees are hybrids, we don't have to worry about it."

If you were to plant American chestnuts, the variety that is highly susceptible to chestnut blight, be prepared for the possibility of never having a crop, since plants tend to develop blight and die before bearing nuts, which is typically at five to seven years old.

Though Petitt says there are isolated American chestnuts still thriving in the western part of the United States, there are no big stands of the trees, and as people become more mobile and hurricanes and tropical storms disturb the environment, the fungus is cropping up in the West.

If you decide to plant chestnut trees, you'll have plenty of support from the small band of chestnut growers and organizations who would love to see this giant of the forest in greater supply.

The Petitts are also anxious to increase the chestnut-tree population and often give presentations and share their chestnut industry research.

"We want to share our success because we were one of the first to provide nuts for the U.S. consumer and there's not a lot of places to go for help," Petitt says. "Over the years, anything we learned, we willingly shared. Usually we're asked to speak at conferences on agriculture; hopefully we're making an impact and people will start to plant trees and see it as a sustainable crop."

Not only do the Petitts share their knowledge, they'll also share some of their tree stock during their annual sale of seedlings in the spring and seed nuts during the fall.

Though lazy days of retirement might just be a dream for the Petitts now, the couple is happy with the path their lives have taken.

"Small farms can be really profitable and the lifestyle is really rewarding, growing what you eat and sharing it with neighbors. It's a peaceful life," Petitt says.

That sums up the good life in a nutshell!

Page 1 | 2

About the Author: Kimberly Button is a freelance journalist.

For more information about Delmarvelous Chestnuts, visit www.buychestnuts.com For the full history of the American Chestnut blight, read "Saving the American Chestnut Tree."

This article first appeared in the September/October issue of Hobby Farms magazine. Pick up a copy at your local bookstore or tack and feed store or buy one online.