



By Buzz Bertolero

The Dirt Gardener

Q: Eight years ago, the city replaced the Bradford Pear street tree with a Red Horse Chestnut. It has been a slow-growing deciduous tree, with a deep taproot so no problem with the sidewalk. It's one negative is the chestnut-like fruits. The squirrels took care of the fruit initially, but now they have become more abundant and my neighbors are now collecting them. They look identical to the ones available during the holidays at the supermarket. I'm now getting concerned if someone were to get sick. Is there anything I can do to limit my liability?

A: The Red Horse Chestnut, *Aesculus carnea*, is a cross between the red buckeye, *Aesculus pavia*, and a horse chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*. Although its origin is unknown, it is believed to be native to Germany.

The fruit of the Horse Chestnut is not a variety of the commercial, holiday chestnut nor should it be confused with water chestnuts. The edible varieties of chestnuts belong to the genus *Castanea* and there are four main species: American, Chinese, European and Japanese.

In European and Asian countries, the Red Horse Chestnut has some medicinal value. It is the third most common single-herb product sold in Germany, after Ginkgo and St. John's wort.

In Japan, an injectable form of horse chestnut is widely used after surgery to reduce swelling; however, it is not available in the United States and it may present a safety risk. The FDA has classified the whole horse chestnut as an unsafe herb.

The active ingredients appear to be a group of chemicals called saponins, of which aescin is

considered the most important. Aescin appears to reduce swelling and inflammation; hence; its appeal to other cultures and nationalities.

So, the dilemma is what to do beside the daily clean up. I'd post a laminated sign on each tree with the following health warning. "FDA has classified the whole horse chestnut as an unsafe herb. Eating the nuts or drinking a tea made from the leaves can cause horse chestnut poisoning, the symptoms of which include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, salivation, headache, breakdown of red blood cells, convulsions, and circulatory and respiratory failure possibly leading to death."

Q: I want to replace the color along my driveway. What can I plant that will tolerate the cool, frosty nights?

A: Pansies, violas, Iceland poppies, primula, English primroses, stock, snapdragons, cyclamen and flowering kale are planted for winter and early spring color. But keep in mind you're planting techniques are a little different than in the spring.

The sun or shade exposure is not important, while the spacing is. The plants are spaced much closer together to avoid bare spots, as you'll see very little growth over the next six to 10 weeks.

Instead of planting twelve inches apart, the spacing should be four to six inches. The color area needs to look as full as possible from the beginning; otherwise, you'll be disappointed waiting for them to fill in.

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CAPTION: The FDA has classified the whole horse chestnut as an unsafe herb.