

Ask A Master Gardener

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## The Native Buckeyes

**Q.** I recently heard someone speak of a buckeye on their property. Is it a shrub or tree? How do you grow them? Can you tell me more about the buckeye?

**A.** There are several species of buckeye that are native in the southeastern U.S. The buckeyes belong to the Hippocastanaceae (the horse chestnut family). Members of this family are trees or shrubs, usually deciduous, shedding their leaves annually. One distinctive feature is the palmate compound leaves. Their compound leaf has (typically) five leaflets that radiate from the petiole-like fingers from the palm of the hand. Buckeyes produce abundant, large nuts. The nuts are called *buckeyes* or *horse chestnuts*, and resemble the eye of a male deer (buck). The brown nuts are produced in leathery cases, with 1-2 nuts per case. The nuts are inedible. The seeds of buckeyes are traditionally carried around by people living in the Appalachian Mountains as a good luck charm and were once thought to protect one from rheumatism.

Carefully examine the site where you are considering planting a buckeye since they require lots of room in the landscape, shade, and moisture. Let's look at some buckeye species, each having distinct characteristics, which are found in our area.

The Bottlebrush Buckeye, *Aesculus parviflora*, is a graceful, deciduous, native shrub. It is a mounding, spreading, multi-stemmed plant. The typical size of a Bottlebrush Buckeye is 8-12 feet tall with a spread of 8-15 feet at maturity. In May–June the plant produces many creamy-white, 8-12 inch flowers giving the appearance of “bottlebrushes” hovering above the plant. This native shrub is an understory plant, and grows best in some sun to partial shade. Buckeyes prefer moist, well-drained soil. Under the right environmental conditions the green leaves turn yellow in the fall. In late winter the shrub may be heavily pruned. As plants age, upright sprouts arise from underground runners. Bottlebrush buckeye is easy to grow from seed if the seed is planted as soon as it is collected. Once the seed dries out, it is difficult to get it to break dormancy and germinate. Bottlebrush Buckeye also can be propagated from pieces of root cuttings.

Red Buckeye, *Aesculus pavia*, is a clump forming, rounding, deciduous, fast growing shrub or tree. The plant has palmate leaves, and ranges from 15-20 feet tall and wide. Scarlet, tubular flowers, with protruding stamens appear in March and April. The flowers are pollinated by ruby throated humming birds during the spring migration. Butterflies also visit the plant for nectar. It flowers well in partial shade, with fertile, moist well drained soil.

By October, Red Buckeye trees will be covered in 2- to 3-inch diameter fruit clusters. The smooth, leathery capsules begin to split and release hard seed. Planting seeds is the best way to

propagate plants. The seeds must not be allowed to dry, but should either be planted outdoors immediately or stored in a refrigerator in bags with moist sphagnum moss to provide the 3 months of stratification (cold and moist treatment) needed for germination. If refrigerated, plant seeds outside in early spring. Seedlings may flower in 2 to 3 years.

Yellow buckeye, *Aesculus flava*, is a large tree. The bark is gray and smooth, but turns scaly or has brown plates as the tree ages. Its flowers are yellowish- white and bell shaped. The beautiful tree reaches 60 -90 feet tall with a spread of 30 feet. It can be used as a specimen tree since it provides good shade as well as ornamental flowers. It prefers deep, moist, well-drained soil and needs plenty of moisture for optimum growth. The yellow buckeye is easy to grow, requires little maintenance, and is seldom bothered by pests or disease. It is mainly found in North Georgia but, can be found in a few Piedmont counties.

Painted buckeye, *Aesculus sylvatica*, is another large shrub or small tree (6-20 feet tall). Flowers appear March-May and the color varies from yellow-green, creamy yellow, or even shades of pink. This buckeye prefers rich soil and partial shade. It can be used as a specimen tree or in a grouping for a woodland setting. In the wild it can be found under hickory, oak, or maple trees. Humming birds rely on the Painted Buckeye as they move north during the spring migration.

As with many plants, Buckeyes are not suitable as a food source. Any part of the shrub or tree is toxic and should not be ingested. In spite of their beauty, there are some gardeners who fear the poisonous nature of the leaves, bark, and nuts of the buckeyes. However, it is common knowledge that many plants can be poisonous. As gardeners and parents, it is critical that we are responsible for keeping safe any who are near our gardens.

If you are interested in the Bottlebrush Buckeye, a great resource to start growing them in your landscape is the Mothers' Day sale held at the Ag Center, 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton. This year the sale is scheduled for Saturday, May 9 from 9 to 2. Shoppers are urged to come early since many selections sell out quickly. Visit the Ask a Master Gardener table for advice and help with your selections. You can request help with horticultural questions by calling 770-836-8546 or sending questions via email to [ccmg@uga.edu](mailto:ccmg@uga.edu).