

**Befriend a
Sweet Chestnut tree
In the Astley Ainslie**



Do you want to be able to continue walking with trees in the Astley Ainslie, the most complete Victorian urban landscape in South Edinburgh where there are 1700 trees with 60 different species, and several of them are over 100 years old?

Well if you care, get involved. And one way to do that is to befriend a tree. Choose your own special tree in the Astley Ainslie and keep an eye on it. You will enjoy learning more about trees, and also increase the chances that your tree won't be cut down when the NHS leaves the site. It would be great if generations to come can enjoy the trees in the Astley Ainslie.

Suggestions for looking out for your tree

Make friends with a tree and rediscover our natural connection. Choose a tree, spend time observing and thinking about it, and document how it changes during the seasons. Come back and visit it over and over again to see what it is like at different times of the year, in the rain or a gale as well as in the sunshine. You can be factual or fantastic – what is it like to be a tree?

- Start a notebook, journal or scrapbook
- Draw or paint it, or make a rubbing of its bark
- Write a poem or sing a song about it

When does it bud? When does it break into leaf, flower, and develop seeds? When do the nuts drop from your tree and when do its leaves change colour and finally drop to the ground, forming a deep carpet beneath the tree? You could also think about:

- When was it planted, and was it connected with any historical events?
- What is its height and spread, and its girth (the diameter of its trunk)
- What birds, mammals and insects does it support?
- Does it look healthy?

Engage with your tree. Check out Peter Wohlleben's¹ book – find out what dramas are being played out around your tree, and find out about its social network.

- Slow down, breathe deep, and look around
- What can you hear? What do you see? How do you feel?

Record any information you want. These are just suggestions. Our knowledge and experience of nature is now slender. We need to recreate the understanding that we are only a part of nature, and wholly dependent upon it for our lives, health and well-being, and even our survival.

Visit our website at: <https://aact.scot>

Go to our website for information and suggestions for tree befriending, including links to other useful websites, TED talks, apps, books, and how to share information about trees.

¹ Wohlleben, P. (2015). The Hidden Life of Trees. What they feel, how they communicate.

Some anecdotes about the sweet chestnut

Sweet chestnut trees have been around since prehistorical times. European chestnuts are thought to have been introduced in the UK by the Romans.

The chestnut fruit is probably one of the first foods eaten by man in Asia, southern Europe and Africa. The Japanese cultivated chestnuts before they began growing rice. In Corsica, there is an old tradition to serve 22 dishes from chestnuts at weddings! Chestnuts contain twice as much starch as potatoes. Unlike other nuts, they are low in fat, and high in fibre and vitamin C. So it's not surprising that the Greek army is thought to have survived on their stores of chestnuts during their retreat from Asia M

inor in 401-399 BCE.

Chestnut trees are used as timber. Coppicing was used in the early 1800's to manage chestnut trees to meet the demand for long, straight poles for hops, stakes, posts and fencing. Every 12-16 years, when the tree stems grow to the desired height and diameter, they are cut at the base, and new stems soon begin to grow again. Chestnut wood was also used by American home owners for beautiful woodwork in the early 1900s, when the wood became widely available due to a blight fungus that resulted in nearly 4 billion North American chestnut trees being cut down.

Probably the oldest sweet chestnut in the UK is in the Torthworth estate in Gloucestershire. It's possibly over 1,200 years old, with a girth of 12m, it is said to have been planted from a nut during the reign of King Ebert in 800 CE. In Scotland, the oldest tree with a documented planting date is the sweet chestnut shown below. It was planted in 1550 at Castle Leod, the seat of the Earls of Cromartie.



The sweet chestnut

This is a deciduous tree (losing its leaves in the autumn). It is native to southern Europe, western Asia, and north Africa.

Common name: Sweet/Spanish Chestnut

Scientific name: *Castanea sativa*

Overview: Related to oaks and beeches, not to horse chestnuts. Normally mature sweet chestnut trees grow to 35m and can live for up to 700 years. The bark is grey-purple and smooth, and develops vertical fissures with age. The twigs are purple-brown and buds are plum, red-brown and oval in shape.

Leaves: Oblong and toothed with a pointed tip, and feature around 20 pairs of prominent parallel veins.

Flowers: Long, yellow catkins of mostly male flowers, with female flowers at the base looking like green rosettes. Both male and female flowers are found on the same tree but are not self-compatible so two trees are needed for pollination.

Fruits: In July, after pollination by insects, female flowers develop into shiny red-brown fruits wrapped in a green, spiky case. The trees begin to bear fruit when they are about 25 years old. British trees do not tend to produce good enough seeds.

Look out for: Teeth around the edges of leaves are widely spaced. The seeds develop inside the prickly green seed cases.

Identified in winter by: The bark has fissures that spiral around the tree

Value to wildlife: The flowers provide an important source of nectar and pollen to bees and other insects, and red squirrels eat the nuts. A large number of micro-moths feed on the leaves and nuts.

Threats: Susceptible to fungal diseases. Chestnut blight has recently arrived in the UK; it causes bark cankers and can lead to dieback and death. Young trees can also suffer from squirrel or deer damage.



Leaf, flowers (catkins), seeds, and fruit (chestnut)