

## Native Chinquapin | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

### PRODUCT NAME

Native Chinquapin  
*Castanea pumila*

### CATEGORY

Other

### COUNTRY

United States of America

### PRODUCT DESCRIPTION

Chinquapin chestnut (*castanea pumila*) — Leaves oblong-lanceolate, short or acutely pointed, coarsely serrate, with incurved pointed teeth, green above, tomentose underneath. Burs in racemes, see illustrations, two-valved. Sometimes the burs are single. Spines branching from a short stalk; nuts solitary, ovoid, pointed, with dark-brown polished shell. Kernel fine-grained, sweet and excellent.

A medium-sized tree, twenty to forty feet high; in rich soils from New Jersey, Southern Pennsylvania and southward, to Georgia, and sparingly westward to Arkansas. Allegheny Chinquapin, *Castanea pumila* trees generally will produce nuts around 3 or 4 years old.

Deciduous tree or bushy shrub to 25 feet; leaves alternate, simple, elongate elliptical, with sharp teeth along the margins; flowers in May to June, male flowers with pungent odor, yellow, in elongated clusters, female flowers tiny; fruit ripening in September, edible, a nut in a splitting, spiny husk.

It is a small deciduous hardwood tree with a broadly spreading crown.

*Castanea pumila* var. *pumila* is a large, spreading, smooth-barked, multi-stemmed shrub that is 2 to 4 m tall. Occasionally, there is but a single stem and the plant may reach 5 to 8 m. Large trees are sometimes found especially where humans have intervened and removed competing trees.

#### Ornamental Characteristics

Very attractive in flower, but flower odor attracts insects and is strong and unpleasant.

The burs of chinkapin are normally no more than 1.4 to 4.6 cm in diameter and split into 2 valves at nut maturity. In contrast to other chestnut species, chinkapins normally remain attached to the bur at the hilum for several days after the bur has opened. Also, the burs and catkins do not abscise at harvest time, but remain attached until later in the fall or even until the following season. On each catkin, the more basal burs usually ripen before the more distal ones. These characteristics make chinkapins very difficult to harvest.

The burs cannot be shaken or easily picked from the trees. After the burs open, but before the nuts fall, the exposed nuts are tempting morsels for birds or climbing mammals. Even at the peak of harvest, shaking a chinkapin branch will bring down only a small percentage of its crop, since half of the nuts are already gone, and the other half have not opened yet. If the unopened burs are cut or torn from the branches, very few of them will subsequently open, with most requiring a tedious threshing.

## Native Chinquapin | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

### PRODUCT TASTE

Chinquapins have a single nut in the burr, unlike chestnuts that have nut divisions. The chinquapin tree is excellent for fresh eating, roasting, or for wildlife food. The size of the edible nut is compared to an acorn or hazelnut. The plants usually bear one nut per bur and have burs (involucre) that open into two halves, such as a clam shell. There are few nuts that can rival the uniquely exquisite flavor of a native chinquapin.

On November 26, 1898, the Trenton Evening Times wrote an article about the stir a rare appearance of chinquapins in a northern market occasioned. The seller observed, “They are more delicate than the chestnut and of rare flavor, but too small for the candy and cake maker to bother with or to be used for the table. They are nice to nibble at in between times... The best of them are exceptionally sweet, tender and well-flavored... The chinquapin doesn’t need cooking like the chestnut to reduce it to toothsome. It is at its best when allowed to ripen thoroughly on the tree, or if packed to soon and only experience can determine the proper stage of maturity from the appearance of the outer coat. It will mellow if laid away in a dark dry place where insects won’t breed.”

### PRODUCT HISTORY

An important component of the foodways of the various Native peoples of the southeastern United States, its uses were recognized in several of the earliest European explorer and settler narratives. Rodrigo Raniel, chronicler of the Desoto expedition of the late 1530s, noted their presence near the Timucua village, Cholutaha, in Alachua County: “They found much food and many small chestnuts, but the trees that bear them are only two palms high and they grow in prickly burrs.” (D. F. Austin, Florida Ethnobotany, 2004). Thomas Harriot in his 1590 narrative of Virginia (the Roanoke colony) noted that the indigenous peoples ate a kind of chestnut that could be consumed raw, although some mashed and boiled the nut meats. Captain John Smith in his history of Virginia famously preserved the name of the nut — Chechinquamin — “which they esteeme a great daintie.” Smith noted that it was dried and stored as part of the community’s regular store of provisions. “Of their Chesnuts and Chechinquamins boyled them make both broth and bread for their chiefe men at their greatest feasts.”

Europeans did not embrace the chinquapin-based foods of the Natives (chinquapin spoon meat, chinquapin bread), but regarded the wild nut bushes as sources of forage for incidental consumption. One hallmark of the general tendency of Euro-Americans to regard chinquapins as a ‘wild crop’ was the disinclination to enter into systematic improvement of the plant. In 1898’s U. S. government report, Nut Culture in the United States, a spokesman for the Division of Pomology remarked, “Though possessing the valuable qualities of dwarfish growth earliness and productiveness and yielding a nut of delicate flavor there seems to have been litte yet accomplished in the improvement of the chinkapin... The wide variation in individual trees of the species would indicate that some valuable varieties may yet be found among the many different wild types. An early ripening chinkapin as large as a small chestnut and as good some of those that find their way into our city markets would be a decided acquisitions particularly if the tree was of fair size and free from the suckering habit.” (p. 90).

Local markets for chinquapins set foragers collecting them in the wild at the end of the 19th century. The nuts were dried in the sun to prevent mold. Because the nuts were prone to worn infestation, astute marketers scalded the nuts in a bath of boiling water.

## Native Chinquapin | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

David Southern observed that the twentieth century brought an expansion of applications for the plant. In rural areas the roots were dried and made into a tea consumed as a febrifuge. The wood of the chinquapin tree was shaped into fence posts and railroad ties. None of these applications took place on sufficient scale to warrant the systematic improvement and cultivation of the tree.

Later in the 20th century, as ecological consciousness grew, commentators began pointing to the important function performed by the chinquapin as a wild food source in those southeastern landscapes that had been ravaged by chestnut blight. Though the blight does affect the chinquapin, it possesses greater resistance to it than the American Chestnut, *Castanea dentata*. Birds, small mammals, and deer eat the ripened nuts.

In part to aid in the reforestation of southern wildlife ecosystems chinquapin seedlings came to be carried by nurseries in the latter decades of the 20th century.

### HISTORICAL PRODUCTION AREA

“The chinkapin may be best described as a dwarf chestnut. It is more or less abundant on sandy knolls and hillsides along the Atlantic Seaboard from Delaware to northern Florida and westward across Pennsylvania southern Ohio Indiana Missouri and Arkansas to eastern Texas. Botanists characterize it as a spreading shrub or small tree having oblong acute serrate leaves downy beneath and bearing small solitary ovoid nuts in small involucre often spiked.

Through Virginia and Tennessee occasional trees are reported that are from 30 to 40 feet in height having the leaf and fruit of the chinkapin with the tree and fruiting habit of the chestnut. These have been commonly regarded as hybrids but from the fact that this tree form is the prevailing type through southern Missouri, Arkansas and Texas it should probably be ranked as a botanical variety of the chinkapin. The chinkapin nut is smaller than the chestnut but makes up for this defect in part by its productiveness and earliness to ripen. It is the first ripe nut to reach the market in the fall and in consequence sometimes brings higher prices than chestnuts.” [Nut Culture in the United States: Embracing Native and Introduced Species By United States. Division of Pomology, 1896, pg. 89]

### FOR WHAT REASON IS THIS PRODUCT OR BREED AT RISK OF DISAPPEARING?

Because of destruction of large portions of the first growth forest in the southeastern United States, and because of the pressures on plants by the exploding deer population in the region, and because of its susceptibility to diseases (particularly root rot) and infestation, the Chinquapin is under stress in large portions of its range. It is listed as a threatened native species in Kentucky and endangered in New Jersey. The stands of chinquapin in Alabama was largely destroyed during the initial wave of the chestnut blight. It is rare throughout its range and for this reason the focus of conservation projects and reforestation efforts.

“The Allegheny chinkapin, also called the American, common, or tree chinkapin, may well be our most ignored and undervalued native North American nut tree. It has been widely hailed as a sweet and edible nut; a wood source for fuel, charcoal, fence post and railroad ties; and a coffee and chocolate substitute (Porcher 1970; Gillespie 1959). In addition, the tree's root has folkloric history as an astringent, a tonic, and a febrifuge (Krochmal and Krochmal 1982). However, chinkapin's great potential lies in its value to commercial chestnut breeding programs and as a source of food and cover for wildlife (Halls 1977; Jaynes 1979; Bailey 1960).”

## Native Chinquapin | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/proceedings1993/v2-500.html>

### POTENTIAL FOR SUSTAINABLE HARVEST OR PRODUCTION SHOULD THE SPECIES REACH A STABLE POPULATION

Dr. Joe James of Seneca, SC a longtime member of The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) and retired orthopedic surgeon, has spent much of his time helping bring back the American chestnut tree since retiring several years ago.

TACF is continuing to support James' work on producing American chestnut trees that can fight off root-rot. He is currently working with chinquapin as well. For more information about supporting this work and bringing an American icon back to the Upstate visit [www.acf.org](http://www.acf.org).

One of the requisites of the effort to create a sustainable population of chinquapins in its historical range is the improvement of the trees so that they resist root rot. Dr. James has made this the focus of his efforts. While the creation of chinquapin orchards for the regular harvest of the nuts does not seem in the offing, given the general preference for chestnuts, the reforestation of the southeast region with chinquapins raises the prospect of a larger wild population of animals fed on the nuts. The flavor of game fed on chinquapins is markedly superior to that of general forage animals. Chinquapin fed deer, like chestnut fed hogs, are legendary wild foods.

### IS THE PRODUCT FOR SALE ON THE MARKET?

It is rarely found in local markets in the southeast in the 21st century. While nurseries sell chinquapin trees, these are largely intended to supply reforestation efforts. The food value of the chinquapin is increasingly seen in terms of the flavor consuming the nuts in the wild imparts to game birds, deer, rabbits, and hogs. If breeding efforts succeeded in making the burr that protects the small nut less difficult to handle and separate, one could envision the sort of effort to create a flour and meal artisan production like that pursued by Anson Mills in 2013 with American chestnut blight-resistant hybrids.

### NAME OF PERSON SUPPLYING THE APPLICATION

Janette Wesley, Slow Food Upstate, Greenville, South Carolina

### PERSONAL MOTIVATION

One of the great wild forage crops of the southeastern woodlands, it has nourished animals and humans for centuries. Greatly harmed by the chestnut blight, the chinquapin has lacked the vocal and active champions that the American Chestnut has inspired. Yet it has been one of the great woodland foods of the American south.

## Native Chinquapin | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

#### **Chinquapin by David Southern, 2006**

Chinquapin husks contain a single kernel that, when ripe in the fall, is a tasty foodstuff for humans as well as animals. Kemp P. Battle, the president of the University of North Carolina from 1876 to 1891, remarked that there were two local delicacies that students dependably would raid: scuppernong grapes and chinquapins. In his day, a convenient grove of chinquapins stood near the intersection of Columbia and Franklin Streets, main corners of modern-day Chapel Hill. In the early 1950s it was possible to buy a bag of chinquapins at roadside stands in hilly, rural North Carolina counties such as Stokes and Surry. The bag was approximately the same size as a bag of peanuts sold at a ball game and usually cost a nickel. At the end of the decade the price had increased to a quarter a bag, if one could find them for sale at all.”

#### **Appalachian Folkways**

##### **Chinquapins**

**November 18, 2011 by Deb Dwyer**

<http://appalachianfolkways.com/2011/11/18/chinquapins/>

“Richard and me called them chickypin.

Have you ever taste the nuts of a chinquapin? My brother and sisters born after 1950 would not know that the chinquapin trees grew on our land and Richard and me went hunting every fall for the nut of the chinquapin. The nut was encased by a burr and to gain the fruit of this tree you had to be brave. We would roll the burrs around until they made contact with a rock and then pound the burr with another rock. Nothing tastes better than the chinquapin.”

“Chinquapin nuts were delicious and we waited for them to fall like you would wait on a crop of corn to ripen,... they were that important. Up on the hilltop the nuts were so plentiful that we scooped them up with flat blade shovels and loaded them into the wagons to be used as livestock feed, to eat for ourselves, and to sell. Deer, bears, turkeys, squirrels, and a variety of other wildlife fattened up on the sweet crop of nuts that fell every year. But, starting in the 1950’s and 60’ all of the trees started dying off. Now they are all gone and no one has heard of them.”

#### **Nations Remembered: An Oral History of the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles in Oklahoma, 1865-1907 Pg. 53**

**By George Prettyman, Cecil Daily News**

I would probably have never known about them if it hadn’t been for Jimmy and the Kennedy children... There’s a little woods at the southeast edge of Zion; it seemed bigger when I was a youngster. It didn’t go deep nor was it dark and scary. Mr. Fred Kennedy’s cows sometimes wandered into it and if you were there when they were swishing their way among the small bushes you might have heard the ringing of a cowbell. In the absence of a fence when a meadow merged with woodland, that’s how farmers kept track of their cattle — by the sound of the bell hung around a cow’s neck. Cows tended to walk the same path every time they ventured into the woods, creating a cow path for us kids to follow; some country roads were once nothing more than a cow path.

## Native Chinquapin | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

That small woodland was a great setting for a game of hide-and-seek or playing cowboys and Indians. Or for meandering — maybe in the fall, in hopes of finding a chinquapin bush with the tiny nuts that had shed their green prickly-looking outer covering and were ready to be eaten.

Chinquapins — also called “chincopins” in some areas — are miniature chestnuts — about the size of a small marble or large green pea. Their shells are soft and easy to crack; like chestnut shells, only not quite that rigid. The nutmeat inside the shell was much like a chestnut’s — a bit mealy, but so sweet to the taste!

As I have said, Jimmy Renn, Frank and Abby Kennedy introduced me to chinquapins. I had never seen nor heard of them. They taught me how to eat them. Just put one in your mouth, open the shell with your teeth, expectorate the shell and enjoy the nut! We spent many an afternoon picking chinquapins and having a feast on them.

In 1904, the Chestnut blight was first reported in the chestnut range along the East Coast. An Asian fungus killed the chestnut trees from New England down throughout the Middle States and into the Southern states - Virginia, West Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Alabama. — the area known as “the chestnut range.” Chinquapin bushes also fell prey to the blight. To the best of my knowledge, chinquapins have never been found in that little woods for the past 75 years and more.

Some people think I am putting them on when I talk about chinquapins. The word is in Webster’s dictionary. It is also on the Internet -not only the word but a photograph in color of “chincopins” with their outer encasement showing its green, prickly-looking spikes. The picture was taken in West Virginia, in the mountainous region. And the accompanying text tells of a Mountaineer named Possum Man who gathers millions of chinquapins in the early fall — before frost hits them — and sells them just as he would sell chestnuts or walnuts. The account mentions that there is but a short time that the little nuts were fit to eat for worms take over not very long after the nuts have ripened. That happens with chestnuts, as I’m sure you have noticed. You buy a bag of chestnuts and you can count on finding a percentage of them already infested by worms.

I’m certain that I am not the only person alive who remembers eating chinquapins. They were but a small part of the past, but they were one of the interesting tidbits of my childhood. And when you put together all the incidentals that made up your growing years — those seemingly insignificant pieces of your life stand out... Searching the woods for chinquapins, trailing arbutus, huckleberries, lady slippers — mild adventures to be sure, but sometimes punctuated by yellow-jacket stings! I was lucky in that I had a mother who had not forgotten the fun of looking for the same forest treasures I have just mentioned. Plus, she knew what to do to take the pain from a bee sting.

No, we cannot turn back time. But that wonderful capacity our Creator gave us — which we call “memory” — can make our quiet hours rich with images from the past. That doesn’t mean that we “live in the past.” Not at all! It means that recollections help make the present enjoyable.

Being a boy was exciting in so many ways, by George!

*George Prettyman has been writing for the Whig since the 1930s.*

“Me and Wallace, we’re the last of the Mohicans in our little corner of the mountains. We were the last generation to grow up close to the land, when music was something to get you through the hard times. We take it for granted that we’ll always be around somehow, and that the world we know, at least our memories of it, will be around too. And then one day, it’s all gone, and the mountains bury that world forever.

## Native Chinquapin | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

Most folks have never heard of a chinquapin, so let me tell you a little about them:

They were little round black nuts, something like a chestnut, but smaller and sweeter. At the end was something like a burr, and you could bite in to 'em and they were a real treat. They were a taste of heaven for a couple of brothers who had to forage for food many a time when we were hungry on our way to school. I remember Carter and me roaming the hillsides, picking chinquapins and gobbling handfuls down like they was going out of style. And don't you know they did.

Sometime or the other, chinquapins just died out, for some reason or another, and there ain't one left on the ridge or hereabouts that I've seen or heard for years. You just can't find chinquapins anywhere. One day, they were as thick as huckleberries, and the next thing you know, they're all gone like they never was. That's something that will set you thinking.

So I just drove on through the night right down the Ralph Stanley Highway heading home after another show, thinking about chinquapins and some other things that ain't no more."

### **Man of Constant Sorrow: My Life and Times** **Ralph Stanley, Eddie Dean. Penguin, Oct 15, 2009**

Ralph Stanley was born in 1927 in a corner of Virginia known as Big Spraddle Creek, a place where music echoed from the ridge tops, was belted out by workers in the fields, and resonated in the one-room country church where Ralph first found his voice. Now in his eighties and still touring, Ralph has at last grown into his voice and is ready to tell his story. In *Man of Constant Sorrow*, Ralph looks back on his career in what most call bluegrass but what he prefers to call "old time mountain music." He recounts the creation of hundreds of classic tracks, including "White Dove," "Rank Stranger," and his signature song, "Man of Constant Sorrow." He also raises a dirge for Appalachia, his mountain home that is quickly disappearing.<sup>77</sup>