Planting and Caring for Chestnut Trees

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When planting chestnuts, there are a few things to consider. Chestnuts, like most fruit trees, must be "cross pollinated" for the nuts to form. Burs are formed even if the female flowers receive no pollen, but the nuts inside will be flat and incapable of growing. For optimum nut production, get two or three trees and plant them near each other (within 100 feet), or rely on the pollen from a neighbor's tree. All species of chestnuts can pollinate each other.

Chestnuts grow best in acid, light-sandy soil, the same as that preferred by rhododendrons and mountain laurels. This describes most of the soils in Connecticut, except for former lawns or agricultural fields that have had heavy applications of lime. When planting your chestnuts (or ANY plant) make sure that the tree is planted at the same level as it was in the pot. Planting a tree too deeply prevents oxygen from reaching the roots. The "feeder roots" of trees, which absorb water, oxygen, and nutrients, grow in the top 8 to 10 inches of the soil. Chestnuts also make "tap roots," which go deep into the soil to act as anchors.

Tree shelters can be made of wire or plastic mesh, or can be as simple as piled brush to protect the trees from deer. Solid plastic tubes will not allow the trees to go properly dormant in the fall, and may result in distorted growth. They also frequently harbor wasps, and provide a nice environment for rodents who then eat the tree bark.

Water the trees once a week during the first summer, unless there has been an inch of rainfall during that week. About a gallon of water per tree is usually enough. If it is really hot, they may need a second watering during the week.

The area around the trees should be kept mowed. A circle about three feet wider than the diameter of the trees should be kept free of grass and weeds. This protects the trees from lawn mower and weed-whacker damage. Mulch can be applied to help with water retention, but should not be deeper than two inches, and should not be up against the trunks (allowing easy access by rodents in the winter).

Fertilize (SPRING ONLY) after the first year. Never fertilize a newly planted tree until its second season so that it will put its energy into making a good root system in its new home (fertilizer encourages plants to make leaves). Use one pound of 5-10-5 or 10-10-10 per year of tree age, or one pound per inch of tree trunk diameter.

Pruning can be done in the late winter while the trees are dormant or when it is hot and dry, in early summer (not later than the first week of July). This reduces the chance of infection. As the trees grow, lower limbs can be removed to control shape. When pruning any tree, you can remove about 1/3 of the foliage during a year without causing any harm.

For more information on chestnut trees, you may contact Sandra Anagnostakis by e-mail (Sandra.Anagnostakis@ct.gov) or by telephone (203-974-8498), or meet her at Plant Science Day at Lockwood Farm in Hamden, the first Wednesday of August.