

Red Buckeye

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The red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*) is an attractive small tree native to the southeastern United States, from Virginia to Florida to Louisiana. The red buckeye typically grows 10 to 15 feet in height, rarely more than 25 feet. It prefers rich soil and partial shade. Its dark green leaves appear early in spring and are shed after yellowing in late summer or fall.

Its fruits have hard leathery husks that split into three parts to release one to three glossy brown, inedible nuts called “buckeyes.” The name refers to the resemblance of the nut, which has a pale patch on a shiny red background, to the eye of a deer.

A glycoside—aesculin—in the sprout, young leaves and mature seed of the tree make both fruits and leaves poisonous if eaten. Wildlife largely ignores the seeds; however, livestock are frequently affected.

A renewed interest in planting native species in residential settings, called “naturescaping,” has brought the red buckeye new popularity as an ornamental tree. Their handsome candelabra-like flower clusters are a magnet for hummingbirds during April and May, and are gaining popularity for butterfly gardens. Their compact size makes them very suitable for planting under and around utility lines as well.



Spring or fall are the best times to plant buckeyes. These trees flourish in deep, fertile, moist soil that is slightly acidic. They should be planted in a sunny or lightly shaded location. Seeds can be sown outdoors as soon as they are ripe or they may be stratified and sown in the spring.

Cultivars with more intense red flower color and habit that is more prostrate are available but are difficult to locate. The native plant can easily develop a more uniform shape by pruning in late winter and early spring to thin crowded branches and shorten any that are too long.

The wood of a red buckeye is clean and white if cut when the sap is down in the winter; however, it is not strong or durable when exposed, so it is used mainly for toys and other minor necessities.

In the late 1800s, the red buckeye was revered for a variety of uses around the house. *The King's American Dispensatory, 1898*, quotes F. Peyre Porcher, M.D.: “The roots of the *Aesculus pavia* were preferred to soap for cleansing and whitening blankets, woolen goods, colored cottons, and satins. The fresh nut was made into a paste with flour, and also the bruised twigs of the shrub, were used in the swamps to stupefy fish, so as to cause them to float that they might readily be taken. The decoction of the nuts was recommended as a topical application to gangrene, and a strong decoction of the root held in the mouth was reputed a cure for toothache.”

Whatever your use for a red buckeye, medical miracle or landscape plant, remember this Southern beauty has legendary powers. Many old-timers and not-so-old-timers believe the fruit of the red buckeye will bring its owner good luck all year around. It is a legendary protector against arthritis when carried in one's pocket and, if you carry one in your right-hand pocket, you will always be lucky with cards. ♣