

BUCKEYES (*AESCULUS*)

John Frett

BUCKEYES are a group of shrubs or trees native to the eastern U.S. (5 species), western U.S. (1 species), Europe (1 species) and Asia (3 species). There are also several natural and horticultural hybrids. Several of these are available in commerce and all offer large clusters of attractive flowers. Plants are easily identified by their opposite, palmately-compound foliage and rather coarse textured stems in the winter landscape. Nurseries most commonly carry our eastern U.S. native species in addition to the European common horsechestnut.

As a shade tree, common horsechestnut, *A. hippocastanum*, is the most frequently occurring *Aesculus* in the landscape. It is often seen in New England, particularly in coastal areas, due to its cold hardiness and salt tolerance. The other large species are the native yellow buckeye, *A. flava* (formerly *A. octandra*) that is native to the Appalachian Mountains but seldom planted in the constructed landscape, and Japanese horsechestnut, *A. turbinata*, also seldom cultivated. The smaller shrub/tree forms commonly planted are primarily eastern U.S. natives and hybrids. Ranging in height from 20–40 feet for *A. glabra*, Ohio buckeye, to 8–12 feet for *A. parviflora*, bottlebrush buckeye, *Aesculus* are best used as small flowering trees in the residential landscape. Most can be limbed up to provide space beneath for planting smaller shrubs and perennials. Only bottlebrush buckeye is a suckering shrub best used as a screen, mass planting, or as a colony in a naturalistic landscape.



Buckeyes are chiefly noted for their inflorescences of white, yellow, pink or red, depending on the species. Horsechestnuts, both the European and Japanese, have the showiest flowers with white petals and white tinged red petals, respectively. The petals flare out to form a dense flower cluster, attractive even on a 50–60 foot tree. The other white flowered species, bottlebrush buckeye, has wispy stamens that protrude beyond the petals creating an 8–12 inch

Aesculus pavia flower
Photo: John Frett



Aesculus sylvatica flower
Photo: John Frett

long bottlebrush-like appearance. Unlike most other buckeyes that flower in May, bottlebrush buckeye flowers in late June or early July. The variety *A. parviflora* var. *serotina* flowers about two weeks later than the species extending the flowering season well into July.

Yellow buckeyes are named for their flowers. Noticeable on mature plants, the flowers are largely appreciated on low hanging branches. The painted buckeye *A. sylvatica*, gets its name from the typically

multicolored flowers that are yellow with varying degrees of red in the throat of the flowers. If you like red flowers, then the red buckeye, *A. pavia*, is perfect. The scarlet red, tubular flowers are held in 4–8 inch long, loose inflorescences that appear as the foliage emerges and is fully expanded. The hybrids, often listed collectively as *A. ×hybrida*, offer some of the more dramatic flowers. Specifically, *A. ×carnea* 'Fort McNair' produces a dramatic, full pink inflorescence on a large shrub or small tree.

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Buckeyes are named for the large brown seeds terminated by a lighter brown circle at the end of the seed. The seeds are nearly the size of a golf ball and are the thing that dreams are made of, if you are a squirrel. Buckeye seeds are toxic to people and livestock. Fall foliage is not showy. Some species do produce reasonably showy yellow (*A. parviflora*), attractive pumpkin orange (*A. flava*), or striking maroon red (*A. ×arnoldiana*) foliage. Some buckeyes will defoliate early (*A. californica*) especially in drought situations, while horsechestnut suffers from foliar diseases in late summer and fall causing premature leaf drop.



Aesculus carnea 'Briotii' flower
Photo: John Frett



Aesculus flava flower
Photo: John Frett



Aesculus hippocastanum flower
Photo: John Frett

Latin Name	Common Name	Mature Size	Light	Soil	Pot Size, Plant Size	Price
<i>Aesculus ×arnoldiana</i>	'Autumn Splendor'	20–30	○●☁		7 g, 4	\$55
Hybrid Buckeye						
'Autumn Splendor' is an outstanding plant with a mysterious history. Some attribute its introduction to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum while other sources indicate it originated as a chance seedling at the Morton Arboretum. Even its name is in question: Is it a hybrid as indicated here or a selection of Ohio buckeye (<i>A. glabra</i>)? Yellow flowers with a red splash appear in mid-May. The foliage is dark green during the summer and brilliant maroon-red in the fall. A small dense tree, this selection demonstrates good resistance to leaf scorch and mildew.						
<i>Aesculus californica</i>	California Buckeye	15–20	○☁		3 g, 2–3	\$35
Rarely seen on the East Coast, the native California buckeye has clean foliage not bothered by mildew or scorch. Visually striking, nicely fragrant, white to pink flowers in 4–8 inch-long flower clusters appear in May. Plants do not like the hot, humid summers in the mid-Atlantic and may defoliate early. 🐛🍄						
<i>Aesculus ×carnea</i>	'Fort McNair'	30–40	○●☁		3 g, 3–4	\$45
Red Horsechestnut						
Possibly the showiest of all buckeye flowers. The fullness of white flowers from <i>A. hippocastanum</i> blended with the scarlet red of <i>A. pavia</i> produce stunning pink flowers with yellow throats. In mid-May, 6–8 inch inflorescences, 3–4 inches wide, can be seen. The clean, dark green foliage is disease resistant; an excellent small tree for residential landscapes.						



Aesculus pavia
Photo: Rick Darke

Latin Name	Common Name	Mature Size	Light	Soil	Pot Size, Plant Size	Price
<i>Aesculus flava</i>	Yellow Buckeye	50–75	○●☁		3 g, 3	\$35
A magnificent large tree well adapted to the eastern U.S., yellow buckeye (formerly <i>A. octandra</i>), is grossly undervalued in the landscape. The 6–7 inch yellow flower clusters are produced on the ends of the branches, with the foliage, early to mid-May. While not as striking as some of the hybrids, the flowers add interest to the spring display. The leaves are clean and turn a unique pumpkin color in fall. Native from PA to IL and south to AL and GA. N 🐛🍄						
<i>Aesculus glabra</i>	Ohio Buckeye	20–40	○●☁		3 g, 3	\$35
I am an Ohio buckeye fan for the duration of the flowering of this tree. Native from PA, west to NE, and south to AL, although it is its nativity to OH that makes it famous. The small to mid-sized tree produces 4–7 inch long green-yellow flowers in early to mid-May and stand out from the leaves. Fall foliage may show the stress of summer or develop a yellow to orange-red fall color. N 🐛🍄						
<i>Aesculus hippocastanum</i>	Common Horsechestnut	50–75	○●☁		1 g, 1–2	\$25
Common horsechestnut is often found encircling outdoor plazas and cafes in Europe where it is frequently pollarded to reduce the height, which also improves viewing of the flowers. In our landscapes, it is a slow growing, upright tree. One specimen in the UDBG is nearly 25 years old and still less than 25 feet tall. Showy white flowers appear in mid-May against the dark green foliage. Plants typically defoliate in September, before any effective fall color is revealed. While causing early defoliation, the fungal infection of the foliage does no damage to the tree.						
<i>Aesculus ×neglecta</i>	'Erythroblastos'	6–10	○●☁		1 g, 1–2	\$35
Hybrid Buckeye						
Sometimes listed as <i>A. ×hybrida</i> , this buckeye was selected for the shrimp pink color of the newly emerging foliage in spring; dramatic but eventually turning green in summer. The yellowish red flowers produced in May are to be expected, as this is a hybrid between <i>A. flava</i> and <i>A. sylvatica</i> . The plant takes after the <i>A. sylvatica</i> parent as it forms a large shrub in the landscape. Plants can be pruned into a tree form underplanted with perennials.						
<i>Aesculus parviflora</i>	Bottlebrush Buckeye	8–12	○●☁		7 g, 4	\$45
Bottlebrush buckeye is the latest flowering of the <i>Aesculus</i> . The white flowers begin to appear in late June or early July with 10–18 inch-long inflorescences. The stamens extend beyond the petals to give the flower cluster a bottlebrush-like appearance, thus the common name. Plants sucker from the base producing a thicket in time. Leaves turn an attractive yellow in the fall. Native in NY, PA NJ, GA, AL, and MS. N 🐛🍄						
<i>Aesculus parviflora</i> var. <i>serotina</i>	'Rogers'	8–12	○●☁		3 g, 1–2	\$55
Bottlebrush Buckeye						
Similar to the species in most characteristics, variety <i>serotina</i> flowers about 2 weeks later. For a continuum of bottlebrush flowers throughout the month of June, plant with the straight species. The cultivar 'Rogers' differs in that it produces inflorescences up to twice as long as the species, further enhancing the summer display. N 🐛🍄						



Aesculus parviflora 'Buckeyes' new leaves emerging
Photo: Rick Darke

Latin Name	Common Name	Mature Size	Light	Soil	Pot Size, Plant Size	Price
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<i>Aesculus pavia</i>	Red Buckeye	12–15	☉	☁	1 g, 1	\$25
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Typically a large shrub, red buckeye can mature into a small tree. The deep red flowers begin as the foliage emerges in May and continue 2–3 weeks as the foliage matures. The dramatic red flowers contrast well against the dark green foliage. Leaves are resistant to the diseases that trouble some other buckeyes. Red buckeye is native from VA west to IL, south to FL and TX. N 🦋 🐦

<i>Aesculus pavia</i> var. <i>humilis</i>		6–9	☉	☁	1 g, 1	\$25
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This is a compact version of the above species well suited to small gardens. These plants come from seed produced by a 20-year-old plant that is barely 6 feet tall. Plants produce dark red flowers in May and have clean foliage that turns yellow in the fall. N 🦋 🐦

<i>Aesculus sylvatica</i>	Painted Buckeye	6–12	☉	☁	1 g, 1	\$25
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Painted buckeye derives its name from the flowers that range from solid yellow, yellow with red markings, to pink, orangey, rarely red. Shrub-sized plants fit well into small



Aesculus parviflora buckeyes
Photo: Rick Darke

Aesculus parviflora in fall
Photo: Rick Darke



QUICK REFERENCE FOR CULTURAL SYMBOLS

All plant heights listed in catalog are in feet. No inches are used.

In order to help you select the right plant for your gardening needs, we have included the symbols below to indicate plant needs. These are broad guidelines, as plants can often withstand a wider range of conditions. Plants that prefer part shade may grow well in full sun if there is adequate soil moisture during hot, dry spells. Similarly, plants that prefer moist soils may grow well in drier sites if some shade is provided, especially midday.

Light Recommendations

○ full sun ● partial sun ● full shade

Soil Moisture Recommendations

☁ dry soil ☁ moist soil ☁ wet soil

🦋 = Lepidoptera use plant as Larval (caterpillar) food source

🐦 = Birds utilize plant as food source & nest building material

👤 = People consume plant fruit or leaves

Native

“N” after the plant description indicates plants are native to the Eastern U.S. We consider cultivars of native plants to be native, regarding them as selections from variants in the population.

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residential landscapes as well as having the added benefit of making the flowers more visible. Leaves remain clean and green into the fall. This is a rare species seldom available in nurseries. Native from VA west to TN south to AL and GA.

<i>Aesculus turbinata</i>	Japanese Horsechestnut	50–60	☉	☁	3 g, 3	\$45
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Seldom available in the trade, Japanese horsechestnut is a large tree with an upright oval canopy. In May, attractive, full 6–10 inch flower clusters appear, white to cream color with red and yellow markings. Foliage emerges a bronze red, fades to a rich green during the summer and turns yellow in the fall. A very unusual shade tree that merits greater attention.