



## *You Can Grow a Buckeye Tree*

Submitted by Faye Mahaffey  
OSUE Brown County Master Gardener Volunteer

Did you know that there are 6 species of Buckeye trees that grow in North America? Two Buckeye species are native to our state: the Ohio Buckeye and the Yellow Buckeye. We had a quick lesson on the different Buckeye nuts on our last gardening day at the Ohio Governor's Residence this past week. It was interesting to see the different sizes of the "eyes" and how the Bottlebrush Buckeye tends to shrivel up! Did you spot the nut in the center of the photograph? It is a Horse Chestnut! Buckeyes and Horse Chestnuts (*Aesculus*) are in the soapberry family (*Sapindaceae*) and produce poisonous nuts.

Laura Jones, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, tells Ohio gardeners who "bleed" scarlet and gray this time of year, there's a way to show your team spirit for years to come, while beautifying your landscape and helping the environment. You can grow your very own Ohio Buckeye tree from the "eye of the buck" itself!

Right now, the branches of most Buckeye trees are laden with seeds or nuts encased inside a greenish-gold, leathery husk. From early September to late October the husks drop to the ground and split open, revealing their hidden treasures. The nuts come out of the husks a deep, glossy chestnut-brown with a tan, circular patch. Native Americans who once inhabited the Ohio Valley region called the nut "hetuck" or "eye of the buck" because it resembled a deer's eye.

Only recently fallen nuts are viable for planting. Because it can be difficult knowing how recently a Buckeye seed has fallen to the ground, experts with the Ohio Division of Forestry, suggest soaking your recently collected Buckeyes in water for two to four hours before planting.

Seeds should be planted in loose, well-worked soil about 6 inches apart, and at a depth twice the diameter of the seed. It won't hurt to plant more Buckeyes than you want, since only half are likely to germinate. To help hold the soil in place, put 2 to 3 inches of mulch, straw or well-rotted sawdust over the planting. Check the soil once a week, adding just enough water to keep it moist.

If there are squirrels in the neighborhood, they'll likely dig up the seeds. To discourage their scavenging, place a screen mesh over the planted seeds before covering them with mulch. Remove the screen and mulch in early spring after the ground thaws.

Once the seeds have germinated in the spring, begin applying enough water to maintain about one-inch per week. During the first season, lightly fertilize in April and again in June.

In August, Buckeye trees big and small will be exhibiting leaf scorch, a nonfatal fungus resulting in early leaf drop. But don't worry, even without its leaves, your little Buckeye tree will be just fine. You'll know it's in good shape if you see a plump bud at the end of the stem – reflecting the start to next year's growth – and if the bark does not appear to be wrinkled.



Keep in mind that Buckeye trees prefer partially shaded conditions. You can transplant your seedling to a sunnier location the first spring after germination. Be sure to do so before it leafs out, and don't wait more than two years to transplant. Trees in more open settings will have to endure the tribulations of leaf scorch, but as the tree matures the reward is more profuse blooming and that ever-so-important nut production.

Buckeyes are some of the first trees to leaf out in the spring, producing the widely recognized fan of five, nearly elliptical leaflets. Cone-shaped clusters of small, pale yellow flowers bloom at the end of branches in late April and early May. In the fall, these popular trees are equally well known for being among the first to turn yellow and drop their leaves.

The Ohio Buckeye tree became our state symbol in 1953, during the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of statehood.

If you are in a hurry to harvest nuts from your very own Ohio Buckeye tree, you might want to consider skipping the seed-planting process and go straight to a local garden center, since an Ohio Buckeye tree won't begin producing nuts until it's 5 to 10 years old! Fall is a great time to plant a tree! Just be sure it is well watered-in before the ground freezes!



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,  
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES