

# THE GLORY OF THE TREE

An Illustrated History  
Noel Kingsbury  
Photography By Andrea Jones

*The Glory of the Tree* bears out the truth that some trees are especially glorious in the fullest sense of the word: deserving of glory, fame or honor; marked by great beauty or splendor; magnificent. Truly, trees are deserving of admiration for the blessings they bestow. They give us air to breathe. They offer shelter and shade. They lavish us with gifts of useful purpose. They surround us with natural luxury and delight our senses.

*The Glory of the Tree* describes 90 species of tree that span the millennia of evolution and the reaches of the globe. Concise narratives include botanical descriptions and note the trees' botany and origin and where they are found today, as well as their size and characteristics, potential age, climate and anecdotal history.

Written with affection and rich with fact, *The Glory of the Tree* is an illustrated travel guide through the world's forests, plains and mountains — wherever trees grow. It is a lovely, abiding poem to one of nature's most generous gifts.

This is an outstanding selection for arborists, gardeners and all who appreciate Earth's natural beauty.

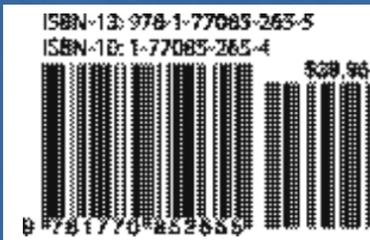
**Dr. Noel Kingsbury** is recognized internationally as a leading innovator in horticulture, landscape, planting design and plant ecology through his many books and journalism. His recent books include *Planting Green Roofs and Living Walls*. He lives in Wales.

**Andrea Jones** is one of the world's foremost garden photographers. Her work has appeared in *Guardian Weekend*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Gardens Illustrated*, *BBC Gardeners' World*, *House & Garden* and *Country Living*. She has also illustrated a number of books, including *Great Gardens of America* by Tim Richardson. She lives in Scotland and has had several successful solo exhibitions in the UK and the United States.

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Noel Kingsbury  
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Actual size:  
9½"x11½"



## JUDAS TREE CERCIS SILIQUASTRUM

**PLANT**  
Family: Malvaceae  
Native range: Eastern Asia  
Cultivation: Full sun, well-drained soil

WALKING THROUGH THE PARK IN SPRING, I'DY GRAB ME a branch. The flowers are pink, but a more intense pink than the petals of flowering cherries. Compared to a cherry, there is also an odd bluish tinge that gives the color a distinctly different quality to that of most other pink flowers. The color is all the more intense for there being no leaves on the tree — these appear later. Although the tree is quite sparsely branched, the flowering is prolific; flowers appear not only from the twigs but the trunk as well. This phenomenon is known as "cauliflory," and is usually seen only amongst tropical species.

A closer examination of the flowers reveals a distinct pea-like shape, and indeed the Judas tree is a member of the pea family. These are relatively few fresh-headed trees in this family, so people who dwell at cooler latitudes tend to be familiar only with non-woody "peas." In the warmer regions of the globe there are a great many members of the family.

People who learn the identity of the tree invariably ask, why "Judas tree"? Legend has it that Judas, a disciple of Jesus Christ who betrayed him to the Roman authorities, later hanged himself from one of these trees in remorse. Unlikely, say most tree experts, as the wood is so brittle and the tree so small that Judas had tried to hang himself from one of its branches, he would most likely have landed on the ground with nothing worse than a few bruises. The name probably derives instead from Judaea, a region of Israel and Palestine where the tree is found. The tree is an early introduction to cultivation in Europe, with seeds

being brought back from the Holy Land by pilgrims, and these would have been a great temptation to consider a good story around the new plant.

The Turkish city of Istanbul has many Judas trees, then, it is a symbol of spring, much like the cherry in other cultures. Middle Eastern cuisines traditionally include a number of elements derived from shrubs or trees and chosen for their slightly sour flavor. The Judas tree is one of these, and the beauty of the flowers can safely be appreciated at the table — they are edible, with a sweet-sour flavor. The "blossom" that fills the dramatic, rust-colored pods on the tree at the end of the year, and which show the tree's membership of the pea family, are inedible, though.

Judas trees are less common in Europe north of the Mediterranean. Being somewhat tender, they need to flourish only in sheltered and south-facing locations, and were often seen only in large gardens, usually close to the walls of a grand house. In warmer times the tree was something of a rarity and a good one to have a status symbol, especially if the seed had actually been brought back from a pilgrimage. However, several decades of warmer weather in western Europe have resulted in many of the trees being planted.

Recent years have also seen a North American relative with very similar flowers being more widely grown. Those who follow the trails of woods in the eastern United States or adjacent areas of Canada may be surprised to see a tree with bright pink flowers deep in the forest. This is the redbud, *Cercis canadensis*, very similar to the Judas tree and commonly found growing beneath the forest canopy. It is, not surprisingly given its origin, considerably harder and therefore more suitable for North American gardens and landscapes. There is a form with dark red leaves, *C. canadensis* 'Forest Pansy', that has become very popular in commercial horticulture in Europe as well as North America. For many cool-temperate gardeners, the Judas tree is likely to stay rather rustic.

A Judas tree in bloom, with flowers emerging directly from the branches.



## SWEET CHESTNUT CASTANEA SATIVA

**PLANT**  
Family: Fagaceae  
Native range: Southern Europe and western Asia  
Cultivation: Full sun, well-drained soil

MANY BOLD AREAS OF NORTHERN ITALY ARE COVERED IN dense woodland. Walking into it, however, reveals that this is not ordinary forest — the trees are nearly all of one species, the sweet chestnut, and they all appear to have been cut down at the base at some point in the past and have regrown. This is coppice, a traditional landscape management practice that was once widespread in Europe and parts of Asia. Sweet chestnut is the coppice tree par excellence. For at least 2,000 years it has been planted as a commercial crop, and the dense chestnut forests of Italy are the result.

Today, we tend to think of chestnuts as the nut nuts that appear in Christmas recipes, cooked as marron glacés or roasted over hot coals on cold winter days, with fingers tentatively probing the heat-retaining nuts to get at the nutty flesh inside. Or, we confuse them with the completely unrelated, and inedible, horse chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*. Across much of Europe, however, the chestnut was primarily a source of wood, in particular for long, straight poles.

Most broad-leaved trees regenerate if they are felled, but they do so in different ways. Most trees send up a few shoots, one or two of which then dominate the others, but chestnut and sweet chestnut both send up many new shoots that grow very straight. If these are removed after a number of years, the stump grows more. This process can go on for centuries, the stump (actually called a "stool") growing steadily bigger and more productive over the

years. The sweet chestnut has been grown in this way across southern and western Europe since at least Roman times, for both poles and firewood. With the development of a semi-industrial brewing industry in northern and central Europe in the late 18th century, chestnut experienced a surge in popularity because long poles were needed to support the hops. Chestnut coppice also supplied "paling," which are poles that are "steeped," i.e., split, rather than sawn, and used to make fencing. The advantage of choosing over sawing is that the wood splits along its natural grain, which forms a relatively impermeable barrier that is very resistant to decay. Decay is further prevented by the high tannin content of the wood. Chestnut paling fencing can last for decades.

Traditional coppicing involved cutting the chestnut at intervals of between 20 and 30 years. Beneath the trees a distinctive flora develops, one that is dominated by species able to cope with the constantly changing light levels. In southern England, the bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) forms spectacular colonies in the years after a cut when light levels are highest. In parts of Italy it is a pink-flowered cyclamen (*Cyclamen hederifolium*) that does this, while blooming in the fall. There was a huge drop in the use of chestnut in the late 20th century and much coppice became overgrown, with the ground so densely shaded that little could flourish there. That may be about to change, however, because sweet chestnut wood has a high caloric value and chips sweet, making it ideal as a biomass fuel. All these overgrown sweet chestnut woods may yet become a fuel resource for the future.

Fascinated to anyone who lives near sweet chestnuts are the nuts and the dromely split nuts that enclose them. These nuts are the second reason for the widespread cultivation of the chestnut across Europe. Today we can afford to look at them rather fondly, as a delicacy or as an ingredient in traditional cuisines, particularly because their nutritional content — high in carbohydrates, but very

A mature sweet chestnut, but one that might soon have been pollarded.

# NINETY OF THE WORLD'S GREAT TREE SPECIES IN GLORIOUS COLOR



low in fat and protein — conforms with a low-cholesterol diet. To previous generations, however, they were a food eaten only in poverty.

The Romans planted sweet chestnuts across Europe in regions where grain could not be grown, particularly at higher altitudes. With the introduction of the potato and maize (roughly similar in nutritional content), the chestnut declined in importance; these new carbohydrate sources were more productive, easier to grow and were more varied in use. Some marginal communities continued to rely on them as a staple food well into the 19th century, but the rest of the population used the nuts only to feed animals, and thus the chestnut acquired a bad reputation. Chestnut porridge, or unleavened bread made from chestnuts, may have led the Roman legions, but to the more sophisticated palates that developed from the 18th century onward such foods were not very appetizing. Today's classier *marron glacés* and a distinct tendency to make vegetarian Christmas dinner from chestnuts is at best helping to rehabilitate the nut's culinary reputation. A growing interest in "agro-forestry" may yet help to bring back sweet chestnut into economic production.

As a tree, the sweet chestnut is attractive and has been frequently planted. A particular feature is its bark, which has a distinctive spiral pattern. Very old chestnuts are widely distributed across Europe, the legacy of landowners often planting them as specimen trees rather than for their economic value. Particularly fine is a 1,000-foot-long (310 m) long avenue of "Armada chestnuts," at Criff Castle in Freebottle, England. Its trees are said to have been given from nuts salvaged from one of the wrecks of the Spanish Armada, which attempted to invade the country in 1588. The fact that these trees have been pollarded has probably lengthened their life; they are now immensely wide, their bark flaking and curling like layers of fat. These are more adolescents, however, compared to one famous chestnut tree, the Castagno del Crato Cavali, on the slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily. This is certainly the world's oldest chestnut, but exactly how old is much disputed, with one botanist claiming it to be 4,000 years old. In the late 18th century it had a circumference of 290 feet (88 m), making it the widest tree ever, but since then it has split into multiple trunks. The sweet chestnut may yet outlive us as a species.

The ancient Crato Cavali, here lit from a fire, is the oldest chestnut tree in the world.



## HAWTHORN CRATAEGUS MONOGYNA, C. LAEVIGATA

**PLANT**  
Family: Rosaceae  
Native range: Europe and western Asia  
Cultivation: Full sun, well-drained soil

WALKING ACROSS THE BLEAK, almost entirely desolate hills of Wales, it is not uncommon to come across isolated hawthorn trees, their trunks bent and gnarled, strands of sheep wool clinging to their thorny branches. Such trees are the legacy of a period when sheep numbers were relatively low and a few shepherds managed to escape the ruthless grazing of their woolly predators. More commonly, hawthorn is found as scrub, or the almost

impenetrable dwarf woodland that develops on abandoned farmland. Most common of all, hawthorn hedging is a distinctive part of the British countryside, and is also found in a limited extent in northern France, Belgium and The Netherlands. Whatever form it takes, as spring turns to summer, it produces pure white flowers that turn bushes white, so that they can be seen from afar during hillwalks or lining the edges of fields. That they flower in May has led to the tree acquiring "may" as one of its many common names in English.

"Quickthorn" is another name, given to it for the rapidity with which it grows. During the 18th century, when large areas of the English countryside were being enclosed, or fenced off by their owners, sales of quickly growing,

tough hedging shrubs were required. Hawthorn was a perfect choice. After a few years of growth, it was "killed," each upright stem was slashed halfway through and bent over, then woven into upright poles hammered into the ground. The result was neat, but also brutal looking. It is a real testament to the power of hawthorn that the trees not only survived, but seemed to flourish, growing into a tough, interwoven hedge that kept out the sheep and intruders out. For a neat hedge, laying really needs to be done every few years. Few farmers can afford to do this now, and wire mesh fencing does a better job. But grants are available for traditional hedge laying in some areas, and this countryman's skill is now enjoying something of a revival. The resulting hedges are a much richer habitat for other plants and wildlife than the mechanically pressed hedges that have come to dominate the countryside.

Most hawthorn is *Crataegus monogyna*, although there is a very similar species, *C. laevigata*, known as the southern hawthorn. The two often hybridize, and several varieties with double or colored flowers have become popular as ornamental plants. Occasionally landowners with a sense of fun plant out bright pink hawthorn cultivars such as "Paul's Scarlet" along the edges of their fields instead of the familiar white, giving the roadside a colorful, garden-like look for a few weeks. Hawthorn wood is immensely hard, but given that the trunks are short, often bent and deeply fissured, the quantity and shape of usable timber is very limited. Its days gone by it was used for walking sticks and tool handles, which are very decorative when polished. Its density makes for the heaviest fire of any European tree species. Such a common tree inevitably has much lore and legend associated with it. There is a widespread belief that cutting it is unlucky — a strange contradiction for a tree so widely used in hedging. Gaelic cultivators in Ireland and Scotland saw the tree as the entrance to the underworld of the faeries. Even the failure of a car company in Belfast in the 1980s was blamed on the cutting down of a renowned "fairy thorn" to make way for the factory. Clearly, cutting one down should not be undertaken lightly.

