



Successful Planting and Establishment of Chestnut Trees

(updated 4/10/18)

Chestnut trees are not difficult to plant and get established as long as a few basic guidelines are followed. Failure to follow these guidelines will likely result in poor growth or even death of the tree.

Site/Soil

The first step in the successful planting of a chestnut tree is to insure you have a suitable site. Chestnuts require a well-drained soil with a pH of 6.5 or lower. If you are not sure of your soil's drainage characteristics, someone in your local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) field office should be able to tell you. Most soils in the eastern half and the southwest quarter of Iowa are naturally within the pH range for chestnuts. Many soils in the northwest quarter of Iowa and a few soils in northeast Iowa have a pH too high, above 8, for chestnuts. If your soil pH is just a little too high, it can be amended with elemental sulfur fertilizer. If you are unsure of the pH of your soil, it is advisable to have it tested.

Site Preparation

Once you have determined you have a suitable site for growing chestnuts, the next step is site preparation. The ground cover between chestnut trees can have a profound effect on the survival and growth of young trees. The absolute worst kind of ground cover for young trees would be grasses suitable for hay and pasture – especially smooth brome grass. Tall fescue and orchard grass are nearly as bad. A good ground cover would include a mix of turf-type grasses (excluding turf type tall fescue) and Dutch white clover. Follow this recipe for a seed mix for the best possible ground cover: for each acre 10 pounds turf type perennial rye grass, 10 pounds creeping red fescue, and 2 pounds Dutch white clover.



When you have a suitable site selected and a compatible ground cover established, you are ready to lay out your planting. It is best to start with a 20' x 20' spacing (108 trees per acre). Trees will need to be thinned 15 to 20 years later. Flag each tree location in a square grid to simplify mowing.

Planting

It is vitally important to plant chestnut trees so the roots are in the ground and the entire trunk is above ground. The root crown, where root and trunk meet, should be exactly at grade when the planting is done. Planting trees "just a little deeper" than they grew in the nursery, like you would plant a tomato plant, will kill chestnut trees.



Tree Shelters/Tubes/Protectors

After planting apply 5 foot tall tree shelters to each tree. Tree shelters protect the trees from deer and rabbits; they reduce tree mortality, make the trees grow faster and start bearing nuts earlier. Tree shelters will also save a great deal of pruning labor. Plantra, www.plantra.com, makes the best tree shelters for chestnut trees. Un-ventilated tree shelters will kill chestnut trees.



Weed Competition

Weed competition, especially from grasses, needs to be controlled around the base of each tree. A 3 foot diameter area should be kept free of all competing vegetation, but especially grasses. This may be the single most important thing you can do to get your trees to survive and thrive. One way to control weed competition is with a 3 foot square of landscape fabric topped with 2 inches of coarse wood chips. Use eight 6" turf staples to secure corners and edges of the fabric. Herbicides, such as Oust, applied by a competent pesticide applicator may be a low-cost alternative.



Mowing for Mouse Control

Besides effective weed control around the base of each tree, it is also important to keep the ground cover between the trees mowed short (like a lawn). Failure to keep the ground cover short will result in a build-up of mouse population. The mice will nest inside the tree shelters and may damage or kill the tree inside. The weed control and ground cover mowing should be kept up while shelters are on the trees (5 to 7 years).

If these guidelines are followed, your chestnut trees will grow, thrive, and begin producing nuts before you know it.



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