



GROWING THE FUTURE  
TYFUR DYFODOL

# CONKERS

**For decades children have played with conkers.**

Nothing compares to the satisfaction of scrunching around in amongst the large lobed leaves under a great arching horse chestnut tree looking for treasured conkers on an autumn day.

The casing around the conker is covered in prickles like a hedgehog, this protects the fruiting body of the conker before it is fully ripe. When the conker is ripe the casing will naturally split open to reveal a beautiful shiny rich russet brown conker. Nature at its best!

In the casing there are either two small conkers perfectly formed sitting side by side, or a single large round conker. This single round conker is the one that conker champions are looking for, without any splits or blemishes.

Conkers are the seeds of the horse chestnut tree. The horse chestnut is a magnificent tree that spreads its branches high and wide. In the spring the flowers stand like candles on the branches. The leaves are a fan of 5-7 large leaflets.

**Warning: Please do not put the conkers in your mouth as they are poisonous.**

## COLLECTING CONKERS

Horse chestnut trees are often planted in parks and large gardens, if you are lucky enough to live near a chestnut tree keep an eye out for the conkers appearing on the branches.

The conkers will start to drop from the beginning of October depending on the weather.

Always check with the land owner before collecting conkers. [We used to have an annual visit to see a lady who had a beautiful tree in her garden, she would wait for us to come and we would bring her a gift as a thank you].

When collecting conkers in a public place it is best to wear gloves in case of dog mess. Always leave enough conkers for the wildlife and the next conker foraging champion.

## GAMES TO PLAY WITH CONKERS

### CONKER CONTEST

The World Conker Championships are held annually on the second Sunday in October in the county of Northamptonshire. However we don't have to go to Northamptonshire to hold a championship, they can be held in the back garden, street, park or school (if the school allows). During the 1990's conker contests were banned in many schools, denying children the age old tradition of children engaging with nature, finding a horse chestnut tree gathering and threading the conkers to take to school and competing against each other, to find the winning conker.

At the National Botanic Garden of Wales, we have held well-managed conker contests for the last 5 years, reintroducing children to an age-old tradition. [The greatest matches were between their parents].

**Preparing a conker for a competition (Adult assistance required).**

**You will need:**

- A good round conker without splits
- Dowel or skewer
- Chopping board
- Thick string or a shoe lace 50cm long

### How to hold the conker:

1. Make a hole right through the middle of the conker
2. Thread the string or lace through and tie a large, thick knot at the end
3. If you are right handed hold the string in the palm of your hand and wrap around the hand with the left hand hold the conker like a catapult between the first two fingers, bringing the string over the thumb of the right hand [see picture]
4. If you are left handed do the opposite

### The rules of a conkers competition:

The rules are very important like any game if it is played properly it will be enjoyed by everyone. By teaching correct rules ensures fair and safe play for all participants.

### Players:

- 2 people
- An umpire (optional)
- A conker on string for each player

### How to play:

1. Always play outdoors, choose a space that is away from other people and pets
2. The game will commence with a toss of a coin, the winner of the toss may elect to strike or receive
3. The person who is not striking holds the string and conker with arm outstretched at right angles away from the body
4. The striker winds the string around the hand and uses the conker as a catapult to strike the opponents conker
5. Never strike towards the opponents face or body
6. Each player then takes turns to have three strikes each
7. Miss hits count as a strike
8. The game will be decided once one of the conkers is smashed
9. If a conker is knocked from the string then the conker can be re-threaded and the game continued
10. No stamping on opponents conkers
11. Three snags (knotting of strings) results in the player being disqualified
12. The winning conker is now called a 1er, if that conker smashes another conker it will be a 2er and so on
13. If it then goes on to smash a conker that is already a 2er it will be a 5er as it takes over the smashed conkers wins as well (if that all makes sense)



### BEST OF LUCK!

Now, a few rules for cheeky players.  
No cheating - No baking - No vinegar - No hardening!

### Hardening conkers

Traditionally there have been lots of advice and recipes to harden the winning conker including:

- Soaking in vinegar
- Slowly baking in the oven
- Leaving in a dark dry drawer to harden for a year

Ask your parents and grandparents what their secret recipe was for getting the hardest conker. Why not challenge them to a contest, you might find that they are very good! Show us your photos and recipes by using [@GTFcymru](#) and [#GrowingTheFuture](#).

## CONKER NOUGHTS AND CROSSES

### You will need:

- A flat stone, slate or a paving slab
- Chalk or a sharp stone
- 5 conkers
- 5 other pieces of nature e.g. leaf acorn pebble

### How to play:

1. Using the chalk or sharp stone draw out a grid of noughts and crosses
2. Take it in turns to try to make a line



## PLANTING CONKERS

Plant a conker and grow a horse chestnut tree for future generations to enjoy.

### How to grow your horse chestnut trees:

1. Place your conkers in a container of water, discard the ones that float these have dried out and are no longer viable
2. Using only the conkers that sink, plant individually in pots of soil/compost about 2cm deep, between October and the end of November. Try planting a few as not all will sprout
3. Water well and place outside
4. The conker will sprout and will have grown 4cm in the first year plant out when the sapling is 30cm high in an open space

Be aware horse chestnut trees grow very large!

Horse chestnut trees grow in nearly any soil, they grow very rapidly into tall straight trees that can reach heights of over 30m tall, with widely spreading branches.

## CONKERS AND SPIDERS

In the autumn spiders come into the house, if you are lucky enough (or not) you may find a large spider in the bath or bathroom.

When houses were cold, draughty and full of cracks and crevices, spiders would continually find their way in to share the warmth.

It was thought that if strings of conkers were hung up around the house, it would deter the spiders, as they don't like the smell that conkers give off.

If you have enjoyed these ideas, please post or send pictures. If you have any other suggestions for autumn fun and games in nature, please do share with us using [@GTFCymru](#) and [#GrowingTheFuture](#).

**Let's have fun with nature together!**



## GROWING THE FUTURE

The Growing the Future project at the National Botanic Garden of Wales is a five-year project to champion Welsh horticulture, plants for pollinators, the protection of wildlife and the virtues of growing plants for food, fun, health and well-being.

Whether you are a seasoned gardener, a fledgling grower or a budding beekeeper – we want to help provide training, information and support to you. For more information on the project's events and courses, please call **01558 667150**, email [gtf@gardenofwales.org.uk](mailto:gtf@gardenofwales.org.uk) or visit [botanicgarden.wales/science/growing-the-future](http://botanicgarden.wales/science/growing-the-future).

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