

## December 2022 Plant of the Month



*Castanea pumila* (L.) Mill.; Chinquapin



*Castanea dentata* (Marsh.) Borkh; American Chestnut

### Genus *Castanea* L., The Chestnuts; Châtaignier

The December *Plant of the Month* documents New Jersey's members of the genus *Castanea*. Chestnut and its shrub relative chinquapin are our only species found east of the Mississippi River. New Jersey was fortunate to support both species. Today, the American Chestnut is no longer a major component to our flora. Chestnut was a major canopy component to the Eastern Deciduous Forest, and occupied a niche that had included an excellent mast fruit that feed millions of animals, and produced wood used by our Native and Early Americans. It was lost more than one hundred years ago when the Chestnut Blight became established as a chestnut

disease in the United States. Vast forests were lost. Today only a few relict immune specimens remain. This plant was a major mast and food component of New Jersey's rich woodlands, including the Valley and Ridge, Highlands, Piedmont, and Inner Coastal Plain Physiographic regions. The loss created a void that has yet to be filled by regional native trees. Chinquapin was never frequent, but it too produces a sweet nut. It has a distribution that extends from the Delaware Bay Shore along the Delaware River into Hunterdon County. It is listed as a state S1 species. I know the species as a relatively common understory shrub in the upland forests of Burden Hill, Quinton Township, Salem County. It occupies an understory space elsewhere occupied by *Quercus ilicifolia*, the bear or scrub oak, in the Pinelands of South Jersey.

The species are differentiated by form. Chinquapin occupies the understory. It is multi-stemmed shrub and appears as a dense colony. When mature, American chestnut is a majestic tree that would occupy the canopy. The leaf of American chestnut is thin with very distinct serrate teeth ending in a long narrow point. Chinquapin has a somewhat leathery leaf with blunt teeth and a less than pointy tip, acute.

Native Americans and early colonial American relied on the wood of American chestnut, and the nuts produced by both tree and shrub. Their mast contribution feed many mammals and contributed to the biomass of the Northeastern Deciduous Forest.

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