

Harvests In climates which suit them, hazelnut trees can provide nuts, truffles and a place to swing.

more than nutty

HAZELNUT TREES PROVIDE NUTS IN AUTUMN, THEY MAKE LOVELY SMALL ORNAMENTAL TREES, AND YOU MIGHT HARVEST SOME TRUFFLES FROM THEM, TOO!



Although they find their way into our diet in a wide variety of forms, it seems to me that, of all the commonly available nuts, hazelnuts are the least well-known, though we consume a lot of them in one form or another.

The name 'hazelnut' applies to the nuts of any of the species of the genus *Corylus*, small deciduous trees and shrubs which occur wide-

ly in the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere. Their nuts have been collected and used as human food since prehistoric times and they are known to have been cultivated for at least two or three thousand years.

The Romans, for instance, grew what is the best-known species, *Corylus avellana*, and introduced it to Britain and northern Europe.

Corylus, incidentally, is the Greek name for this nut and *avellana* means 'of Avella Vecchia', an ancient town in southern Italy.

male & female

Like others of the genus, *Corylus avellana* produces its male and female flowers separately on the same plant. In late winter the male flowers appear in slender catkins

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which, hanging from the leafless branches, give the plants a most attractive appearance. The female flowers, on the other hand, are produced in inconspicuous bud-like clusters surrounded by leaf-like bracts. Curiously, although the pollen from the male flowers falls or is blown onto the female flowers at this time of year, it does not bring about fertilisation until three or four months later. The nuts then develop throughout the summer, maturing and falling naturally in autumn.

Numerous cultivated varieties have now been named and there are two main types – those in which the nuts protrude from the surrounding bracts and those in which they are almost completely enclosed. The latter kinds, sometimes called filberts, have been considered by some botanists to belong to a different species, *Corylus maxima*, though nowadays they are usually considered to be varieties or cultivars of the common hazelnut.

many branches

Apart from being producers of nuts, hazelnut trees have other important uses. As it happens these trees are naturally multi-stemmed, branching from their bases of their own accord, sending up narrow growths to 4-5m. In Europe advantage has long been taken of this habit of continually branching from the base for the practice known as coppicing, the cutting back of the plants to their bases every few years to provide rods for use as stakes and woven structures such as wattles and light fences.

Females The female flowers (above right) are bud-like clusters, much smaller than the male flowers (below right).

Males Appearing on bare branches in winter, the male catkins are large and a very attractive feature every year.



ornamentals

Hazelnuts have also found favour for use as ornamental small trees, particularly on account of their yellow catkins produced in winter and their handsome oval or round leaves with toothed edges in the warmer months. Several ornamental varieties have been named, for example 'Aurea' and 'Purpurea' both of which are most attractive garden plants.

Not surprisingly, 'Aurea' has yellow young leaves which become a little greener in summer, and 'Purpurea' has exceptionally dark purple foliage and produces purple-tinted catkins.

Equally striking is the variety 'Contorta', the corkscrew hazel, also known, at least in the past, as Harry Lauder's walking stick (Sir Harry Lauder was a famous Scottish singer and entertainer). With its spirally twisted shoots and yellow catkins this is particularly effective in winter and is a great favourite with flower arrangers. These varieties are well worth growing in cooler zones but care must be taken to remove any suckers should the plants happen to have been grafted onto seedling or other stock.

culinary uses

Hazelnut kernels are usually eaten whole or as an ingredient of various types of cakes and confectionery,



Ornamental The ornamental variety 'Contorta' in winter with its male catkins and twisted branches.

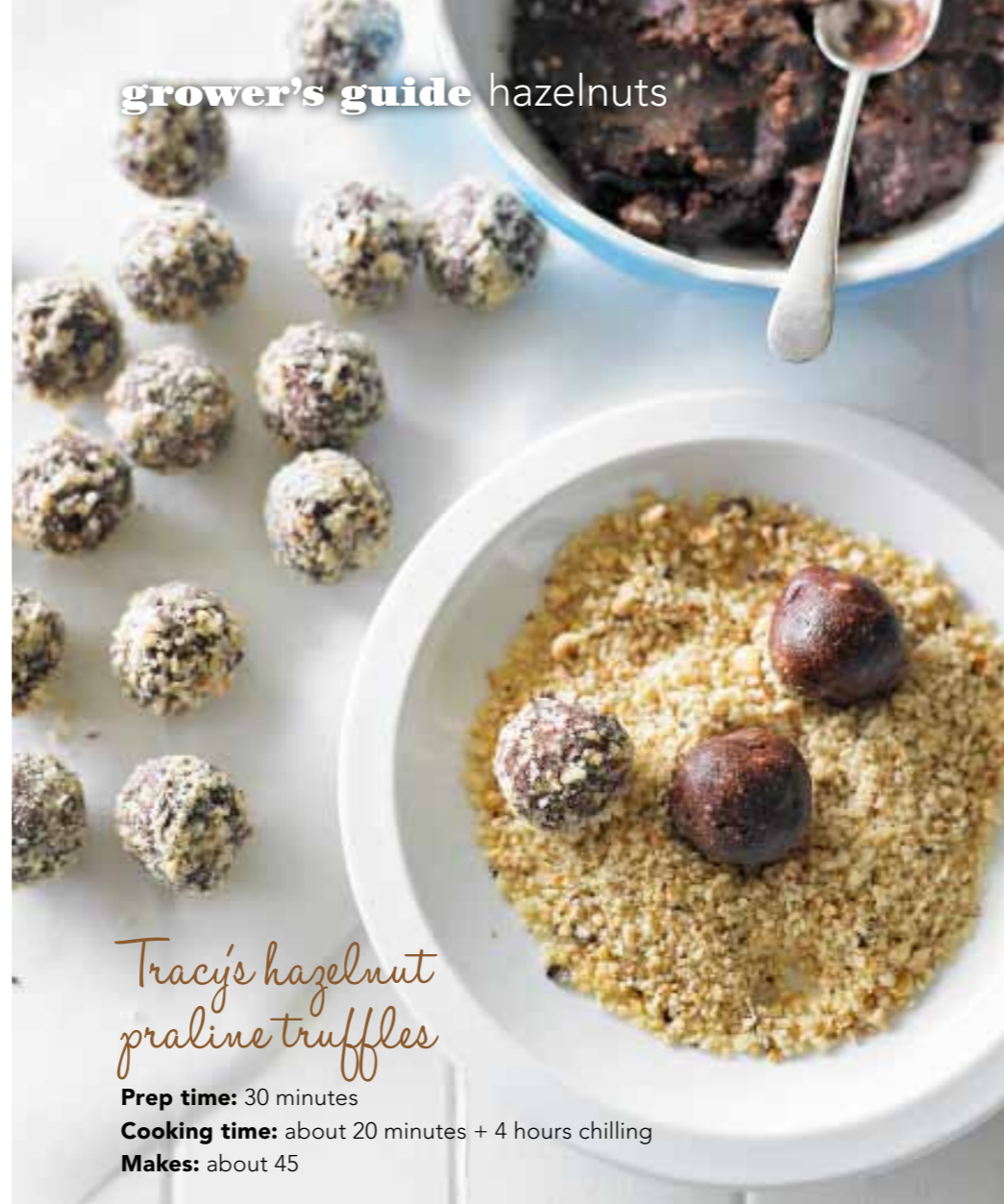
buying tips

In the case of the varieties grown for their nuts it is particularly important that the plants are not grafted and are on their own roots so that they can develop naturally, continually producing shoots from their bases. Hazelnuts have proved difficult to grow from cuttings so that propagators have resorted to layering or taking rooted suckers from established plants. Look for the 'Three Trees 4 Nuts' which are supplied to retailers in suitable climates in winter, as a unit consisting of three dormant bare-rooted young hazelnut trees. A list of retail stockists of 'Three Trees 4 Nuts' is published on the Australian Gourmet Hazelnuts website, www.gourmethazelnuts.com.au

AND THE WINNER IS...

Hazelnuts are widely cultivated in commercial orchards in Europe, Turkey, Iran, the Caucasus, North America, Chile and, to a much lesser extent, Australia and New Zealand. Of all these, the top producer, by a large margin, is Turkey.

grower's guide hazelnuts



Tracy's hazelnut praline truffles

Prep time: 30 minutes

Cooking time: about 20 minutes + 4 hours chilling

Makes: about 45

other truffles!

Hazelnuts are capable of hosting truffles in the soil around the tree's roots. These 'real' truffles are fungal fruiting bodies which have a strong scent highly prized by gourmets. These are of course very different things from the popular chocolatey sweets, also called truffles, a recipe for which appears above on this page.

whether whole, crushed, ground into flour or made into a paste. They are commonly used to make pralines and chocolate truffles (see Tracy's recipe above). They are also used in ice-creams, for making spreads such as the popular Nutella, and for flavouring liqueurs such as the Frangelico of northern Italy. And they star, too, in the cake world where, notable among an array of different recipes, they are regular ingredients of the rich layered confections known as tortes and dacquoises.

2 cups (270g) hazelnuts
1/2 cup (125mL) cream
400g dark chocolate, chopped
1/2 cup (110g) caster sugar

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C. Spread the hazelnuts onto a tray and roast for 8 minutes, until lightly golden. Cool slightly, then tip onto a tea towel, then rub the nuts in the cloth to loosen the skins. Take the hazelnuts off the tea towel, leaving the papery skin behind (some won't come off at all, but that's OK).
2. Pour the cream into a saucepan, and add the chocolate. Heat over low heat until the cream is warm and the chocolate is just starting to melt, then remove from the heat and stir until smooth. Transfer to a bowl, and stand for 20 minutes, until cooled and thickened.
3. Place half the hazelnuts close together on a foil-lined oven tray. Finely chop the remaining hazelnuts (or do it in the food processor, but do it in short bursts only).
4. Combine the sugar in a saucepan with 1/2 cup (125mL) water. Stir over low heat without boiling until the sugar has dissolved. Bring to the boil over medium heat, then cook without stirring for 10 minutes, until the toffee turns a golden brown colour. Pour over the hazelnuts, and leave for 15 minutes, until set hard.
5. Break up the hazelnut toffee and process to crumbs. Stir into the chocolate mixture, and refrigerate for about 4 hours, until firm. Roll heaped teaspoons of mixture into balls. Roll in the chopped hazelnuts, and store in a single layer in an airtight container in the fridge for up to 1 week. Take from the fridge to soften slightly before serving.

next month: luculia & gordonia, winter bloomers