



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*
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Allegheny Chinquapin

(*Castanea pumila*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Chinquapin, also spelled "chinkapin," is derived from an Algonquin Indian name. Captain John Smith published an early description in 1624 in his *Generall Historie of Virginia*: "They [the Indians] have a small fruit growing on little trees, husked like a Chesnut, but the fruit most like a very small Acorne. This they call Chechinquamins, which they esteeme a great daintie." In North Carolina and Georgia the Cherokee Indians reportedly made a tea from chinquapin leaves to treat fevers and headaches. The high tannin content of the leaves and bark made it useful to pioneer families as an astringent, a febrifuge (to reduce fevers), and as a leather tanning agent.

Allegheny chinquapin (*Castanea pumila*) is a large deciduous, colonial shrub that often attains the proportions of a tree, to about 40 feet tall. The leaves are alternate, oblong or elliptical, 4 to 6 inches long, up to 2 inches wide, with prominent parallel lateral veins that end in marginal teeth. The bark is gray-brown with shallow furrows and scaly plates. The hard, durable wood has been used for posts and tool handles, but it is too small to be of value as a lumber species.

Chinquapin is monoecious, with male and female flowers developing separately on the same plant. The fruits are nuts, resembling small acorns, enclosed singly in a spiny bur that splits open when ripe in the fall. The native range is from southern Pennsylvania, south to central Florida, west to eastern Texas. In Alabama, chinquapin is scattered throughout the state, mostly on well-drained, open or thinly forested sites.



Photo by Fred Nation

Chestnuts are family relations of chinquapin. A close relative, the stately American chestnut, *Castanea dentata*, was devastated by an exotic fungal blight that entered the United States about 1900, killing virtually all of the chestnut trees throughout their native range. Unfortunately, the closely related chinquapin is susceptible to infection by the same fungus. Once infected, dark, seeping cankers appear on the main stems, and they die down to the ground, where they sometimes resprout from the roots. Chinquapin

populations are probably in decline because of this disastrous fungal disease.

Since chinquapin is a thicket-former, it provides excellent shelter and nesting cover for many wildlife species. The mast crop feeds wild turkeys, bears, and squirrels during the fall and winter. Whitetail deer browse the foliage, and several woodpecker species are known to feed on the nuts. Because of its shelter and food value and its adaptability to poor sites, chinquapin has some potential in restoration projects. It is currently available from a few southern sources as nursery-grown stock, but the chestnut blight may cause some reluctance of its use by landowners and project managers.

Allegheny chinquapin is an interesting, historic species in the eastern and southern forest midstory. Many Alabamians have fond memories of collecting chinquapins as the days become short and crisp in the fall. Fingers pricked by the sharp, spiny burs were the small price we paid for the delectable nuts, and a very small price for the happy memories of good times in the great outdoors of Alabama. 🌲