

Hazelnuts.

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The Hazel is an unusual and interesting plant. There are hazel varieties native to all the temperate zones of the northern hemisphere - North America, Europe, Turkey, China and even the Himalayas but only one (the European hazel) is cultivated for its edible nuts. It appears (from pollen counts in peat bogs) that the hazel was one of the first woody plants to recolonise Northern Europe after the last ice age 6-10,000 years ago and it is an important component of the broadleaf deciduous European Forest. Hazels are related to the birch and alders and have the curious and seemingly inefficient way of reproducing in winter by releasing literally millions and millions of pollen grains from their male "catkins" hoping that one will meet and mate with the tiny red female flowers in the leaf axils. In winter we can see a light yellow cloud of pollen drift down our hazel row.

Hazels are grown for their nuts in four distinct parts of the world: the Black Sea coast of Turkey, Northern Italy, the Atlantic Coast of Spain (where the Spanish bush cherries and lots of eucalypts grow) and in Oregon and Washington states of the USA. There is a large export industry and hazel meal is widely used in confectionary, biscuits, and of course in chocolates, especially in European cooking.

About 10 or 15 years ago, Orange Research Station in NSW established trial plots of hazels from the NSW / QLD border right down through NSW, Victoria and into Tasmania. At one stage there were considerable hazel plantations. These plantations should be bearing reasonable crops by now... However hazels, being understorey shrubs in moist European forests definitely have high water requirements and don't like to be stressed by temperatures over 35° and hot desiccating westerly winds. Many plantations must have suffered in the droughts of the last few years.

Hazels are self-sterile and can't pollinate themselves. You need complimentary varieties for good pollination and fruit set. That's why we sell them in packs of 4 or so varieties. There are many people out there who contact me about their old hazel bushes that flower prolifically but never set a crop.

They should be planted about 2-3 metres apart and will eventually grow into each other forming a dense hedge. Mix up varieties for good pollination. 2 Litre per hour drippers are satisfactory for irrigation. They need good care and attention for the first 2 years and often are a bit slow to get going but once established they are tough and relatively trouble free. The nuts fall off during March. Keep the bushes pruned up so you can easily get in there under them to pick up the crop.

Bob Magnus 2007