Horse chestnut trees, ducks and pest control
(Natural solutions - do it with ducks!)

We moved to our house in Upton Noble around ten years ago. The garden has a very large horse chestnut tree of considerable age in the north east corner. Although in a sunny position, the tree was looking very unhealthy and we called in a tree surgeon to lop dead branches and generally advise us on how to revive it. He diagnosed the presence of the Macedonian leaf miner beetle. This parasite is responsible for the devastation of many horse chestnuts in recent years and in our village, several are severely affected.



The larva feeds in a mine in the leaves of the tree, damaging the leaves and stunting growth. Infected leaves are covered in small brown patches which spread rapidly across the entire tree, giving an autumnal appearance. Eventually the leaves die and drop off; when new ones grow they are again infected. This cycle can repeat itself several times in one season.

Above: leaf miner damage

We purchased three male Indian runner ducks as ducklings for our daughter's birthday and kept them in the garden, free range and locked away at night. The following year, the change to the horse chestnut was very noticeable. The browning of the leaves giving an autumnal look in mid-summer was absent, the tree seemed distinctly healthier and this recovery continued over the following year or two until the tree was once again a healthy and fully 'leafed' specimen. The duck's enthusiastic rooting among the fallen leaf litter was also an obvious sight in the garden during late summer and autumn. Research by ourselves revealed that in fact ducks, but runner ducks especially are well known as pest controllers in India where they routinely patrol rice fields and in Italy, where a thousand at a time are used in preference to pesticides in vineyards. For the Italians the solution is cheaper, self-fertilising, and enables a move towards organic wine status.It is noticeable that one side of our horse chestnut is less well recovered than the rest of the tree. These branches overhang a field on the other side of the garden wall to which the ducks do not have access.





This photograph shows the uneven growth to the right hand side

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