

Janet B. Carson
Extension Horticulture Specialist
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
Persimmons- November 2015



It is persimmon season. The common persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana*, is a slow growing, mid-sized native tree which has a heavy fruit crop right now. The Latin name means “food of the gods”, but if you have ever eaten a common persimmon fruit prior to a frost, you know the meaning of pucker-power—the fruits are highly astringent until they have fully ripened. While a frost is really not needed to ripen them, they do require a long season to get fully ripe, and if not ripe, they will be astringent, bordering on inedible.

With all the interest in locally grown and growing your own edibles, persimmons are gaining in popularity. They are even finding their way to the farmers markets. There are two types of persimmons grown in Arkansas, the native persimmon with mature fruits which are about 1 to 2 inches in diameter, and the oriental persimmon with mature fruits ranging from flat shaped to rounded grapefruit sized fruits weighing up to a pound or more.

The native persimmon tree is dioecious—meaning there are separate male trees and separate female trees. You need one of each to bear fruit, and only the female tree will have any fruit. With the oriental persimmons, some varieties are self-fruitful with trees which have both male and female flowers while others need another variety for cross-pollination.

Persimmons can be grown from seed, but it can take 4-9 years before they begin to bloom and then you need to determine if they are male or female. Most trees in the trade are grafted, and can begin to bear fruit in 3-6 years. A few varieties of the native persimmon have been found to be self-fruitful, but a bit hard to find. ‘Meador’ is one that is self-fruitful.

The native persimmon is a very adaptable tree, growing in most soil types in full sun to partial shade. Persimmon trees will withstand short periods of drought, but the fruit will be larger and of higher quality with regular watering. Extreme drought will cause the leaves and fruit to drop prematurely. At maturity it can be 40 feet tall. The persimmon is a cousin of the African ebony tree. It has hard, dark and beautifully grained wood. A lot of the large old trees were cut to make golf clubs during the early years of the 20th century and are still used in specialized furniture pieces.

Mature fruit may be yellow, orange, or bright red, or bluish in color. Fruit becomes soft and mushy when ripe. Unripe fruit, which is high in tannins, has a bitter astringent flavor, thus the pucker-power. The golden orange to red fruit are very sweet when fully ripened and astringency is reduced. Some pointers to know when to harvest is that when the fruit is ripe it will pull away easily from the branch, turn a deep orange color and be soft to the touch.

Edible fruits often hang on the trees through fall, and even into winter, unaffected by freezing temperatures. Songbirds, raccoons, squirrels, and deer are some of the animals which enjoy the extra fruit in the late fall and winter.

The oriental persimmon is native to China, where it has been grown for centuries. It is the national fruit of Japan. It came to the United States in the mid-1800's starting in California, and now they are grown in roughly half of the US. Oriental persimmon fruit ripens from late August until early December, depending on the variety and weather conditions. *Fuyu-Gaki persimmon* is the most widely planted cultivar in the world. When fully ripe, this fruit turns a crimson red with a blue blush. It is also self-fruitful. Other self-fruitful varieties include Gionbo with very large (4-5") orange conical, astringent fruits, Great Wall, and Matsumoto. Most oriental persimmon trees grow about 15 feet tall and wide.

Persimmon fruits can be eaten raw or cooked, fresh or dried, and are eaten out of hand or used in baked goods, puddings, and other deserts. Low in calories and fats, this little fruit contains all kinds of phytonutrients, flavonoids, and antioxidants.

In addition to being edible, persimmons have long been thought to be weather prognosticators. If you harvest the fruit of the native persimmon, find the seeds and cut them in half. This is not easily done since they are quite slippery. Inside each seed will be a white embryo in the center. They are generally shapes as either a "fork", "knife", or "spoon". If you see a fork, it means a mild winter. A spoon means lots of snow—a spoon for shoveling, and a knife means a cold winter ahead—it will cut like a knife! So far, we have seen all spoons and one knife this winter, so if the persimmons are right, it will not be a pleasant winter!

