



Department of Horticulture

Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service • West Lafayette, IN

Persimmons

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The persimmon is native to the southeastern United States and grows wild over much of southern Indiana. But, occasionally individual plants are found in northern Indiana. While native persimmons are not widely cultivated commercially, the fruit is prized by southern Indiana residents as a real delicacy, both fresh and in persimmon dishes such as persimmon pudding. The trees are often grown in home fruit gardens to provide a ready supply of fruit in the fall.

The wood is extremely dense, hard and uniform in texture. Its property of becoming and staying very smooth and polished under continued wear make it prized in use in shuttles for textile weaving. Its smoothness, density and resistance to mechanical shock make it very desirable for golf club heads. A small amount of the wood is used in veneer for furniture.

About The Tree

The native persimmon is botanically known as *Diospyros virginiana*. The species is native throughout the lower midwest and the southeastern states. It is known to be hardy to temperatures of 20 to 25° below zero without apparent winter injury. The native persimmon is a small tree, but may often reach a height of 40 to 50 feet and occasionally even larger under ideal conditions. The tree has a round topped head and a spreading form with often pendulous branches. The leaves are oval or elliptical, tapered, shiny on the upper side and smooth or finely hairy underneath. The leaves are 3 to 6 inches long. The bark is a dark gray-black and is attractively and deeply fissured.

The greenish yellow flowers are borne on very short stalks. The staminate (male) flowers are usually borne in threes; are about 1/4 to 1/3 inches long, and contain usually 16 stamens. The pistillate (female) flowers are borne singly, ranging 1/2 to 3/4 inches in length with four two-lobed styles.

About The Fruit

The fruit of the native persimmon is round or oval, resembling some plum varieties. The calyx becomes much enlarged and is considered quite decorative. The fruit color is usually orange, ranging to black, and the skin usually has a heavy waxy bloom. Fruit size is quite variable, ranging from 1/2 inch diameter to 1-1/2 to 2 inches in the better varieties or selections.

The flavor and quality is also variable, ranging anywhere from a flat, insipid flavor to good, sweet, quite delectable quality. In most cases the flesh is very pungent and astringent, and until the fruit is soft ripe it will pucker the mouth. But fully ripe persimmons are sweet and mellow.

However, the idea that frost is required before persimmon fruit become edible is incorrect. Many varieties, including some of the best, lose their "pucker-power" as they become ripe long before frost has a chance to do its work. Native persimmons have from one to ten large brown, smooth seeds 1/3 to 1/2 inches long. Occasionally seedless forms occur, and several of these are propagated as varieties.

Fruiting Habit

The persimmon is dioecious, that is, each tree produces only either male or female flowers. This means that both male and female trees are necessary to produce a crop of fruit. The native persimmon is regularly dioecious, with male trees producing only staminate flowers and female trees producing only pistillate flowers. In only rare instances are trees self-pollinating. Only the female trees bear fruit.

It is probably best to obtain budded or grafted trees from a reliable nurseryman to be sure of getting the type of trees you want and to be sure of trees with desirable fruit characteristics. If planting seedling trees, it may be many years before they can be identified as male or female.

Propagation

Propagation of trees is primarily by seed, although root cuttings may be used. Improved varieties are obtained through grafting since persimmons do not reproduce "true" from seeds. Seed must be kept for 60-90 days at 50°F under moist conditions to obtain good germination, or seed may be planted in the fall and permitted to stratify naturally in the ground over winter. The seed bed should be mulched.

Planting and Care

For best growth, the trees should be spaced at about a 20 x 20 feet distance to provide ample space for the tree to develop. In home garden situations, the trees can be grown as multiple stem plants and are quite attractive in this situation, especially where unusual bark patterns are

desired. Under these circumstances they become more shrub like, especially in the northern part of the state. The multiple stemmed plants can be used for a large border shrub or as an accent plant. The fall color is not really attractive but ranges from the yellows to browns with the leaves falling quite early.

Care of the persimmon is minimal. Fertilization is not usually necessary, other than the fertilization which would normally be given to a lawn. Pruning is not usually needed, except to limit tree size, and to correct faults such as dead or broken limbs.

Occasionally if an extremely large crop of fruit is born there will be a very sparse crop or none the following year. This is called biennial bearing and is common to a number of fruit crops. It can be counteracted to some degree by early thinning of the fruit in the "on" or heavy year especially on small or young trees. To thin, remove half or more of the developing fruit within a month after bloom, which usually occurs in June. On larger trees, thinning becomes impractical.

A number of selections of persimmons have been named and are available as commercial varieties. The following list is not by any means comprehensive, but includes several of the better varieties available as propagating wood or as grafted trees. Descriptions were prepared from data supplied by John Talbott, Linton, Indiana.

Even Golden — ripens in mid-September in southern Indiana, is of excellent quality and firmness. Size is medium and fruits contain 3-8 seeds; one of the oldest cultivated varieties. Very productive.

John Rick — ripens in early October in southern Indiana. Is also of excellent flavor and firmness, is larger than Early Golden. Fruit contains 2-8 seeds. Productive.

Woolbright — ripens in early October. Excellent flavor but soft, splitting when it falls. Fruit large with 2-8 seeds. Productive.

Miller — good late variety. Flavor good, texture firm, size large with 2-8 seeds. Productive.

Killen — ripens in early October, flavor good, texture firm, size medium, moderately productive.

Ennis — seedless variety, ripening in mid-October. Excellent flavor, soft texture, medium size, moderately productive.

The Oriental Persimmon

The oriental persimmon, *Diospyros kaki*, is not native to Indiana and is not adapted to Indiana conditions. Hoosier winters are too cold to permit cultivation of this species except in rare and very protected situations. It is not hardy below about 10°F. This is the species of commerce and is grown commercially in southern areas of California. The fruit ranges to 3 inches across and is seedless in most varieties. Nursery catalogs frequently advertise this species, but Indiana gardeners are cautioned against purchasing plants of *D. kaki*.

Persimmon Cookery

Persimmons are utilized in many ways. They are eaten fresh, and when fully ripened have a delightfully sweet flavor. Persimmons are also used in puddings, cookies, cakes, custard, sherbet and the like. The pulp is prepared from fully ripened persimmons, which have been washed and had the calyx removed. The fruit is crushed through a colander or food mill to separate the pulp from the seeds and skin. The pulp then may be used immediately or frozen for use later. Stainless steel or non-metallic utensils should be used where possible.

Persimmon Pudding

2 cups pulp	1 tsp salt
3 eggs	1/2 tsp cinnamon
1 3/4 cups milk	1/2 tsp nutmet
2 cups sifted flour	1-1/2 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon soda	2 Tbsp melted butter

Mix the persimmon pulp, beaten eggs, and milk. Sift the dry ingredients together and pour the liquid mixture into them. Stir in the melted butter and pour into a shallow greased pan to the depth of about 2 inches. Bake for about 1 hour in a very moderate oven (300° to 325° F). When cold, cut into squares and serve with plain or whipped cream.

(From the USDA No. FB685)

Another slightly different recipe was contributed by Mrs. Frank Forbes of Washington, Indiana .

Syrup:

1 cup light brown sugar	2 Tbsp butter
1 cup water	

Bring to a boil and set aside

1 cup persimmon pulp	1 cup flour
1 cup sugar	3/4 cup sweet milk
2 Tbsp melted butter	1 tsp baking powder
1/2 tsp salt	

Add sugar to pulp with melted butter. Add one well beaten egg. Sift flour, salt and baking powder together well. Add flour mixture alternately with milk (start with flour and end with flour).

Pour syrup into bottom of deep square pan first.

Bake at 350° for about one hour (or less). Serve with whipped

**Professor emeritus*

For more information on the subject discussed in this publication, consult your local office of the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.