

Non-Timber Forest Products

Persimmon

by Shawn R. Wright



*A male persimmon tree in flower.
Photo courtesy: Jerry Lehman*

People that have ever had the native persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*) usually have one of two responses: they shudder remembering the time they bit into a beautiful fruit thinking it was ripe only to start choking on the astringent pulp--or they smile. For those who have had a positive experience they could be thinking of persimmon pudding, persimmon bars, persimmon bread, persimmon butter, persimmon cheesecake, persimmon cookies, persimmon cream, fresh persimmons and dried persimmon.

If the culinary uses of persimmon aren't enough to catch your interest, persimmon wood has been used for golf club heads, pool cues, drumsticks, shoe lasts, cornbread knives and wooden spoons. It is attractive to bees and produces abundant nectar in good years. The tree is useful for landscaping, providing year round interest in lo-

The leaves of persimmon are dark green and glossy above and are typically three to six inches long. The bark of persimmon is much more distinctive and is characteristically gray-black, divided by furrows into square blocks.



Photos courtesy: Chris Evans, River to River CWMA, Bugwood.org

cations that will accept a 20 to 50 foot tree. The dark green leaves are glossy above and lighter underneath, the bark has a unique gray blocky texture when mature, and the fruit that is not eaten by birds and small mammals persists into early winter. Persimmon don't require spraying because the trees are relatively free from insect pests and persimmon wilt, caused by the fungus *Cephalosporium diospyri*, is the main disease problem of significance. *Coniothyrium* leaf spot can also cause defoliation.

Site selection

Most persimmons are found throughout Kentucky though it is less common in eastern Kentucky. It tolerates most soil types and will grow rapidly on good sites. The trees have a strong taproot that makes them difficult to transplant, but once established they are resistant to drought. The tree grows best in full sun, though it will tolerate shade and can persist in the forest understory. Prolific suckering from the roots can lead to the formation of thickets in forest openings and can help revegetate disturbed locations.

The American persimmon shouldn't be confused with the Asian persimmon (*Diospyros kaki*) or the hybrids that are available. The Asian persimmon is far more common in grocery stores where it sells

for \$1 to \$2 per pound. The fruit is larger than the native persimmon, the tree smaller and less winter hardy. Hybrids of the American and Asian varieties also are available and will survive and produce fruit most years.

Fruit production

Most American persimmon is dioecious; the tree is either male or female. You will need to plant both male and female trees. An easy way to tell the tree sex is by the flowering pattern. Male flowers (see left) grow in groups of two or three, though occasionally are found singular. The female flowers are solitary (right). Supplemental pollination is not necessary because the trees are good nectar producers and attractive to bees. Blossom loss to frost is not usually a concern because the trees are one of the last to leaf out in the spring, and blossoms don't open until the leaves are approximately half-size. You can maximize your production of high-quality fruit in a few ways. Treat the tree as you would other fruit trees. Full sun is important and you should have a soil test done to check pH and soil fertility levels. The trees grow best on a slightly acidic site (pH 6.0-6.5) with moderate fertility. Excess nitrogen can cause fruit drop. Trees can be pruned to a central leader when young but fruit is produced on new wood so do not prune heavily if at all once the tree is established other than to open the canopy and remove damaged wood.

Fruit production will be greatest with one of the hardy Asian persimmons or the hybrids, and you can expect fruit in seven to eight years. Most Asian persimmons are not hardy below 10°F. These trees do not get much larger than 20 feet tall, making them much more suited for an orchard or backyard setting. Fruit can be astringent, like the American varieties, less astringent, or non-astringent. The non-astringent varieties can be eaten while still firm and do not have as much tannin. Asian persimmon may tend to biennial bearing producing a heavy crop in one year and very little the next. To avoid this you can thin the fruit by hand in the 'heavy years'. These also will benefit from having



A female persimmon tree has a solitary flower.

Photo courtesy: Jerry Lehman

more than one variety planted nearby for cross pollination. 'Galley' has been reported to be a good Asian male pollinator but the Asian varieties will not pollinate the native persimmon and the native persimmon will not pollinate the Asian varieties.

For those who have an interest

and skill in grafting, one way to improve a native persimmon planting would be to obtain scion wood or buds from the Asian varieties and graft them on native persimmon root-stock or suckers. Whip or cleft grafting have all been used, as has chip budding. This provides the advantage of a native root stock and the quality of the Asian fruiting wood.

Harvesting begins in late summer until early winter depending on the variety. American persimmon will fall from the tree when ripe. If it is almost ripe and you are losing the fruit to wildlife, you can pick it and place it in a brown paper sack containing a ripe banana. This will hasten the ripening process. The less astringent Asian varieties can be picked when full-colored and firm though pruners may be necessary to remove fruit from the branch.

Persimmon can be easily germinated from seed if it has been stratified in moist media for three months. Pick up a few persimmons this fall when you are out walking in the woods, enjoy the fruit, clean off the seed and place it in some damp potting mix outside. Come spring you should have some new seedlings coming up that can be planted near at hand so you can have easy access to this delicious fruit in a few years.

References

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Persimmon fruit is a berry that can be very astringent before it is ripe. However once it is ripe it very popular with people and wildlife and is eaten fresh, dried, or cooked in quite a few recipes.

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