

## The Pecan Tree-- Pleasure or Pain?

By Susan Camp

A Gloucester resident called the Extension Office last week with questions about the pecan trees on her property. Her call reminded me of the year I worked as a home health nurse in James City County. One of my patients was a pleasant man who lived on a rural road lined with large farms. One October day his wife greeted me at their front door with two grocery bags filled with nuts from the stately pecan trees that lined the road to their farmhouse. Although I did not accept gifts of monetary value from patients, I couldn't resist the bags of plump, freshly harvested pecans. She was so insistent, saying, "If you don't take them, the squirrels will get them." That Thanksgiving and Christmas we had delicious pecan pies, cookies with nuts, and homemade ice cream topping.

The southern pecan or paper shell type (*Carya illinoensis*) is the most important commercial nut produced in the southeastern United States, with Georgia as the leading grower. The growing season in Virginia is too short for significant commercial production, as the nuts require a long period for the nuts to fill their shells, according to Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 2906-1377. Pecan trees are grown in Virginias as landscape trees and provide forage for squirrels, birds, and humans alike.

If you decide to plant pecan trees, choose the site with an eye to future size. The pecan is a large deciduous tree, growing up to 130 feet in height with a spread of up to 75 feet. The trunk can reach seven feet in diameter, so careful planning is needed to avoid planting too close to buildings and power lines. Multiple trees should be planted a minimum of 60 to 80 feet apart.

The pecan tree is monoecious, meaning that the male catkin and the female flowers are borne at separate locations on the same tree. Some pecan cultivars develop catkins and flowers at different times, making sufficient cross-pollination for a good nut crop somewhat iffy. Plant at least three varieties within 200 feet of one another to increase pollination. Clemson University publication HGIC 1356 "Pecan Planting and Fertilization" offers information on all aspects of pecan tree planting and care.

Unfortunately, pecan trees are highly susceptible to pecan scab, a disease caused by the fungus *Cladosporium carygenum*. Scab affects leaves, small twigs, male catkins, and the husks that surround and protect the nuts. The fungus overwinters on tree debris, so good sanitation is crucial to decrease the occurrence of scab, although it is nearly impossible to prevent. The best prevention is to plant the most highly scab-resistant varieties, including 'Excel', 'Elliott', and 'Kanza'. Treatment includes spraying with fungicides. Call the Gloucester Extension Office at (804) 693-2602 to contact a Tree Steward for information on safe application of fungicides and other chemicals. Pecan trees also are susceptible to several other fungal diseases, including several types of leaf spot, downy mildew, and anthracnose. See Clemson University Extension publication HGIC 2211 "Pecan Diseases" for further information. Several insect pests damage

pecan trees and nuts, including nut casebearers, black aphids, stinkbugs, shuckworms, and pecan weevils. "Insect Pests of Pecan" is an online slideshow from the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences containing color slides of various pests and information on prevention and treatment.

If this article hasn't discouraged you from planting pecan trees, choose appropriate varieties four to five feet tall. Plant in late fall or early winter. You can expect to begin harvesting nuts in six to seven years. Of course, you will have to fight those crafty squirrels for them. Harvest the nuts as soon as some begin to fall and don't let them lie on the ground to rot.

You will be rewarded with delicious nuts you can use to make all sorts of goodies for the holidays and give as gifts for friends and family to enjoy.

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