

American Persimmon, the Bitter and the Sweet

By Susan Camp

One of my favorite memories of growing up in Hampton was of our big yard filled with huge trees just waiting to be climbed in that endless summer of childhood. The fact is our yard really wasn't very big, and when I look at old photos, I can identify only a willow and two ratty-looking bird cherry trees in the front yard. But the back yard held my favorite, a persimmon tree. I don't remember anyone eating the persimmons it produced. My mother thought they were awful, and so did I. I'm sure my friends and I thought it was great fun to squish the ripe ones into a gooey mess.

Diospyros virginiana, the common or American persimmon, is native to the United States from Connecticut to Florida and west and south to Iowa and Texas. It is hardy to USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 4 through 9, meaning it can withstand winter temperatures to minus 20 to 25 degrees Fahrenheit. It is a small tree, growing 30 to 40 feet tall. The trunk is short, with dark gray bark that resembles alligator scales as the tree ages. Branches become pendulous, especially when heavy with fruit. The American persimmon likes a sunny spot and well-drained, loamy or sandy soil with a pH of 6.5 to 7.5., although it isn't fussy and will tolerate partial shade, as long as the site is neither water-logged nor too dry. The heartwood, which takes as long as 100 years to develop, is a deep, rich black. The pale sapwood has a variety of uses, including the manufacture of pool cues and percussion mallets. It was once used in the manufacture of golf "woods". The autumn color of persimmon is brilliant orange to crimson. The fruit hangs on the trees long after the leaves have fallen.

D. virginiana is a dioecious tree, meaning that you will need to plant both a female and male tree in order for the female to set fruit. The persimmon fruit, which can range from the size of a cherry to that of an apple, is technically a berry. The color of the fruit ranges from yellow to deep orange-red, depending on the variety. There is a reddish-purple variety, as well. The Clemson Cooperative Extension publication HGIC 1357 names several desirable varieties, including Early Golden, John Rick, and Garretson, all productive with excellent flavor and quality.

Its formal name, *Diospyros*, translates loosely as "food of the gods". Hopefully, those gods fed only on ripe persimmons, as the unripe fruit is bitterly astringent and inedible from the production of tannin. The ripe fruit is sweet. According to folklore, the fruit must undergo the first frost to ripen to sweetness, but this is not true. The persimmon just takes a long time to ripen, and by then, may have been eaten by squirrels or raccoons.

American persimmons are hard when unripe. Harvest them when the skin looks wrinkly and they are mushy to the touch. The taste is compared to that of a ripe apricot. Persimmons have a wide variety of uses, from puddings, pies, and preserves to sherbet and ice cream. Persimmons are even used to brew wine and beer, and the leaves to brew tea. They can be eaten dried, cooked, or raw.

American persimmons may be available at local farmers' markets in the autumn, but the varieties you see at the grocery store are probably from the Asian persimmon tree, *Diospyros kaki*. Asian persimmons are non-astringent, so the bitter taste is not present, which takes away a lot of the fun and anticipation of taking a bite of persimmon.

American persimmon trees are available at specialty nurseries and nurseries that sell native plants. They would make an interesting addition to any property and provide color and fruit for animals and humans. And mystery— Is it ripe? Do I dare bite it?

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