 by Paula Steers Brown, Contributing Columnist

PERSIMMONS

The persimmon is an ambrosial fruit, under the right conditions. After all, it is not named Diospyrus — "food of the gods"— for nothing.

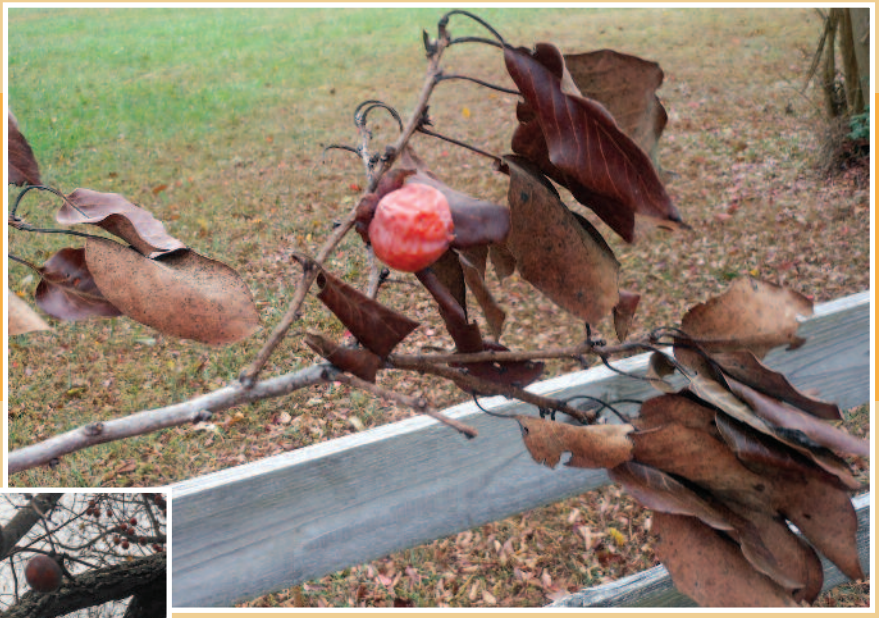
Too bad the thing people often remember about persimmons is the involuntary pucker of the lips after eating an under-ripe one! But when fully ripened, these orange fruits are sweet and creamy with a succulent flesh of a plum consistency and a hint of date-like richness. The trick is to get them at the right stage — ripe enough to be sweet but not so ripe that they are mushy. Although some cultivars' fruits are edible without frost treatment, most need to be left on the trees until after frost to avoid any bitter, astringent quality.

Arborist Guy Sternburg says it is not the frost that ripens the fruits, but the passage of enough time so that, by the date of a hard frost, they have sweetened. Some folks do, however, gather under-ripe fruits and pop them in the freezer overnight, claiming tasty results.

The persimmon tree native to forests of eastern and central North America, *D. virginiana*, is often seen in fields and fencerows; it can grow 35-65 feet or more. This handsome native is one of only three truly hardy members of the ebony family Ebenaceae — the wood resembles that of ebony, being black, dense, tough and close grained. Strong yet flexible, persimmon wood was traditionally used for making golf club heads, billiard cues, flooring and veneer. American persimmon trees have outstanding ornamental characteristics, one of which is their spectacular foliage

The persimmon's mature bark is quickly recognizable because of its dark color and distinctive, deeply furrowed pattern, almost like mosaic tiles, grouted. Lingering fruits dot bare branches against a winter sky.

(Right) Drooping dark leaves with a lighter underside give the tree an overall softness and dimension. (Inset) The persimmon's irregular branching habit adds to its winter interest.



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display in the fall. Young trees are symmetrical, and their colorful leaves begin to droop from the twigs, giving an overall soft appearance. The bark is a particularly interesting feature. On old trunks, it is thick and dark, almost black, and cracks in maturity into rough squarish plates, deeply fissured into a pattern like a checkerboard. When all the leaves fall, the fruit remains like bright ball ornaments.

Striking orange balls against dark limbs with a rather wild, picturesque branching habit as they age is a scene that really captures the spirit of the Halloween season. Although it is a stunner in the fall, the persimmon tree with its mosaic bark, craggy branches, and long-lasting fruit may cast even more of a spell in winter. The stark limbs remain dotted with orange until the wind or birds remove the fruits. Animals are responsible for spreading the seed widely. The wild fruit has value as food for wildlife and also attracts luna moths, ghostly visitors who lend more eerie magic, fluttering around the tree by moonlight.

Because persimmons can hang on a tree for more than a month before all of them drop and because of their softness when ripe, these fruits are not produce for commercial trade. Maybe that makes them seem more special. You have to discover them, on farms and fencerows, and hope no one minds you foraging. Or, plant your own tree if you have the room.

The persimmons you see in markets in the fall are the Japanese variety, *D. kaki*. These have more meat because the fruits are larger and have far fewer seeds. Also, they can be peeled and chopped. However, the Japanese variety lacks the rich flavor of the native variety and its pulp can become watery. *D. kaki* is a smaller tree and can be adapted to a large container where its tangerine-sized shiny orange fruits would lend exotic interest to a patio area.

Persimmon trees prefer moist sandy soils, but will do well in dry soils of low fertility. They are pH adaptable and do well on slopes to prevent erosion. The persimmon is a hardy survivor and can adapt to urban stress. Interestingly, there are male and female flowers on separate trees, males flowering in clusters, females singly. The creamy bell-like flowers, appearing in May-June, are fragrant and honeybees love them.

The persimmon is versatile. Its pulp can be made into almost any dessert, cakes, pies and puddings, as well as pancakes and breads. The pulp can even be fermented to make persimmon beer. Its date-like quality and high pectin content make it good for fruit leather when dried in a food dehydrator. Colonists valued the plentiful pectin because persimmons did not take much extra sugar to thicken when cooked into their famous puddings or preserves. Give your Thanksgiving table an authentic Colonial air by incorporating persimmons in a pudding or a rustic and colorful fruit salad.

Persimmons are nutritious, full of vitamins A and C, calcium, potassium, iron and fiber. Their enzymes papain and bromlaine (well-known in papaya) are valuable natural aids in digestion. To make persimmon pulp, simmer the fruit 5-10 minutes in a covered saucepan over low heat, stirring frequently and adding a splash of apple or other fruit juice to keep it from sticking. After the pulp cools, strain it or just pick out the seeds. (Expect it to reduce by about half.) Any sweet herb or spice such as cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, cloves, allspice, sassafras, or mint complements the complex flavor and rich texture.

If you are interested in persimmons, you might consider contacting NAFEX, the North American Fruit Explorers, a nonprofit group of nature enthusiasts committed to the cultivation and appreciation of exceptional varieties of fruits and nuts. One member shared with *Mother Earth News* a comparison of the group to monks in the Dark Ages keeping knowledge alive for future generations with their efforts and care. It might be fun to tramp around and glean more wisdom about some of these old oddities of the plant world. ■