

In Praise of the Princely Persimmon

by Skip Richter, Travis County Extension Director

Persimmons may well be the Rodney Dangerfields of the fruit world. They seldom are found with apples, peaches, plums and pears in nurseries. Most catalogue sources either don't offer them, or relegate them to a back page status. Their place in the supermarket produce section is off in a corner with the kumquats, plantains and other obscure fruits. For most people they are either the golfball sized wild fruit of childhood that taught you in no uncertain terms what the word astringent meant, or the bland, tasteless baseball-sized varieties commonly sold in grocery stores (and unfortunately recommended for years for home planting).

Alas, I am here to defend this maligned fruit and hopefully rekindle some interest in its virtue as a valuable addition to our gardens and landscapes. Several ethnic groups adore persimmons giving them the place of honor they deserve. Why they have never made the jump to the mainstream of the American palate is a mystery to me. Even their genus name, *Diospyros*, means "food-of-the-gods!"

The recent arrival of numerous "new" persimmon varieties has greatly expanded and improved our options.



Native Eastern persimmon trees in Austin



Oriental Persimmons

Many have excellent flavor and aromatic qualities and most offer a pucker-free experience even when not fully ripe! The rich, subtle flavors and aromas of a fully ripe persimmon are something to experience.

Persimmon varieties may be divided into 2 groups; astringent and non-astringent. Astringent types must be fully ripe (jelly-like) before they are eaten. Some people are a bit turned off by the "messiness" of a truly ripe persimmon, but don't seem to mind the texture of pudding, jelly or any other similar food, so what's the big deal? Perhaps we need a national persimmon board who can take up the slogan, "Persimmons – the fruit you eat in the bathtub!"

The second type of persimmon is the non-astringent. These may be eaten after turning fully orange without waiting for them to get soft. Many of the new types are non-astringent, and as such are very popular. I think even the non-astringent types should be allowed to soften before you eat them for the **best** flavor.

Persimmons are virtually pest free. About the only significant pests seen are the twig girdler, which occasionally shows up to prune off branch ends, and a leaf spot fungus. Neither requires spraying.

There are two persimmons native to Texas. The first, *Diospyros texana*, is a shrubby bush/tree found in the western portions of the state, and is plentiful in the Austin area. Its dime-sized, black fruit is hardly palatable although some make jelly from it. It is a valuable, drought tolerant landscape plant.

The eastern persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana*, is native throughout the eastern U.S. including much of the eastern third of Texas. This wild persimmon's chief culinary contribution to our area is its superior performance as a rootstock onto which the larger Asian varieties (*Diospyros kaki*) are grafted.

Persimmons ripen in mid to late fall. Their bright orange fruits hang on the tree on into early winter after the leaves have fallen for a beautiful, ornamental effect. If your neighbor has a tree it may be time to bake them a pie and go visit...get the idea? Maybe they'd trade persimmons for a loaf of holiday persimmon bread. Delicious fresh, persimmons may be used in a variety of holiday recipes including pudding, custard, cake, sherbet and a wonderful holiday bread made with black walnuts.