

Sweet fall treat — with or without frost

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Ah. The persimmon, a fruit of childhood trickery and sweet-treat of nature. I once persuaded my younger brother to taste the fruit, resulting in a very entertaining face puckering, intense mouth drawing, squinting of the eyes comedy show.

My grandfather loved the persimmon, but the reaction of my brother to the unripe fruit kept me far away from this native delicacy. After moving to Delaware where the persimmon is a common roadside tree, my childhood curiosity was sparked once again. Not for malicious acts, but to answer the question of why my grandfather sought after this fruit.

The only native persimmon in this region, the common persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*), belongs

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in the family Ebenaceae, the ebony family. The common persimmon is one of a small percentage of temperate species in a mostly tropical family. The easiest place to find persimmon trees in our region is along roadsides or fencerows. The bark is rough, dark, and thick with a rectangular pattern, like the skin of an alligator. The wood of persimmon is very hard with dark heartwood, hence its presence in the ebony family.

The elliptical leaves are 2 to 5 inches long, glossy, and mostly elongated egg-shaped. This small to medium height tree is easily picked out in late fall when the fruits ripen and trees have dropped their leaves. The orange fruits, larger than a cherry and smaller than a tangerine, are attached directly to the twigs and branches and produced in large numbers in late summer through fall.

The common persimmon is a tasteful addition to the garden, but can be a difficult species to transplant because of its deep root system. Once established through seed or a successful transplant, this species is tolerant of a variety of conditions and relatively maintenance free. It prefers organic, well drained, moist soils in full sun. Both male and female plants are necessary for the production of fruit, which provides a very nice fall and winter color display. The bell-like flowers of the female plant are very fragrant with some cultivars enhancing this attribute. These may be some of the horticultural qualities appreciated by Thomas Jefferson in his gardens at Monticello.

Native Americans used the persimmon as a food and medicine. The delight of this fruit has been noted by many including the members of the de Soto expedition in the mid-16th century, Capt. John Smith, and many present day locals. Wildlife, including fox, turkey and opossum depend on this late crop. Persimmon fruits can be incorporated into many recipes including cakes, breads, pies, preserves, pudding, ice



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A stand of several common persimmon trees with fruit found growing along an old field road in Kent County.

cream, beer, and brandy with an added bonus of high vitamin C content.

To discuss persimmon and not mention frost would place many people in the uncomfortable position of my naïve little brother. Folklore says that only after a frost will the persimmon be sweet and edible. Tannins are the cause of the unpleasant astringent effects on its unknowing victims.

Only time will reduce the tannins into a satisfyingly sweet treat. How much time?

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The first frost is a good sign, but many ripen before that point. Persimmons also grow and ripen in areas that rarely experience frost, so time is key. A ripe fruit is very soft, squishy, juicy, and falls from its branch with a slight bump. This underutilized native edible fruit has long been a part of many traditional baked goods and puddings and can continue to be a native holiday treat!

Preparation of persimmon pulp

1. Use a plant guide to correctly identify the persimmon tree. Collect very soft, squishy persimmons and wash thoroughly.
2. Mash well in bowl.
3. Pour the mashed persimmon into a colander with large holes and use a masher or spoon to force the pulp through into another bowl.
4. Discard the skins and seeds.
5. Use pulp raw or cooked. To cook, add one cup of water to three cups of pulp and cook for 10 to 15 minutes. Note, the addition of baking soda to this step (about half a teaspoon to one cup of pulp) removes any remaining astringency in the pulp.

Persimmon Date Pudding

- 1/4 cups sifted flour
- 1 1/2 tsp baking soda
- 1 1/2 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup soft bread crumbs
- 1 cup raw persimmon pulp
- 1 cup chopped dates
- 1/2 - 1 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 1/2 tbsp melted butter
- 1/2 cup milk

Sift together flour, soda, baking powder, salt, and sugar. Add remaining ingredients and mix well. Pour into a waxed-paper lined, greased loaf pan and cover with aluminum foil. Bake at 350 degrees for 1 1/2 hours. Serve hot or cold with hard sauce, ice cream, or whipped cream. Serves 10 to 12.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and e-mail amanda.treher@gmail.com (Amanda Treher, M.S. Graduate Student) for more infor-