
Persimmons

Early North America explorers found native persimmon trees (*Diospyros virginiana*) from Florida north to Connecticut, west to Iowa and south to Texas. The persimmon tree was once called "pasimian" by the Delaware and Cree Indians. It was an Algonquian word that meant "dried fruit" and was used as a winter food source by these Native Americans. There is also a black persimmon (*Diospyros texana*) native to the Chihuahuan desert areas of south Texas and northern Mexico. Oriental persimmons (*Diospyros kaki*) were introduced into the United States less than a hundred years ago. Asian varieties are recommended for planting in our area because of their hardiness and quality fruit.

North American persimmons are usually dioecious; that is, trees produce either male or female flowers. Only rarely are native persimmons self-pollinating. In asian persimmons, female, male and/or perfect flowers can be produced on the same tree. In addition, many asian persimmons can produce fruit from unfertilized flowers (parthenocarpic fruit), though such fruit have no seeds.

Asian persimmons can be grown in Arizona from the deserts up to higher elevations where temperatures do not go below 10 degrees F. They tolerate a variety of soils, but poor drainage and/or standing water can cause fruit drop or a decline in vigor. They require little or no fertilization and should produce about one foot of leader growth per year when young. If the crop is heavy, fruit can be thinned. This will result in more consistent bearing from year to year. Mature trees may reach 20 to 30 feet in height and have an open and attractive branching structure. Little pruning is necessary and should only be done to improve structure or to remove broken or damaged limbs. Persimmon trees have an attractive growth form, make a nice landscape tree, and have few pests in Arizona at this time.

Persimmon trees may take 7 years to begin bearing. The fruit ripens in the late fall or early winter. They can be harvested while still firm and allowed to soften indoors. The varieties "Hachiya" and "Fuyu" are proven producers in the Verde Valley area. "Hachiya" is a vigorous tree that produces a large, cone-shaped fruit that is very astringent until completely ripened (translucent skin and soft to the touch). "Fuyu" is a smaller tree that produces medium sized, somewhat square-shaped fruit which is non-astringent while firm. Some people enjoy eating them like apples.

Eating persimmons as fresh fruit is not for everyone. They can also be dried. They also make excellent baked goods.

The persimmon is a member of the ebony tree family (*Ebenaceae*). The wood is very heavy and hard and has commercial value as veneer and is used to make specialty items (shuttles for weaving, inlay, furniture, turning, etc.). It was once commonly used to make golf clubs (some crafts persons shun titanium and still make these traditional wooden drivers).

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Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

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