

Learning about Common Persimmon *Diospyros virginiana*

Common persimmon is a small to medium sized tree that can grow up to 15 to 60 feet tall. This tree sends down a deep taproot, which makes it a good species to help control erosion. The tree also serves as an important food source for wildlife. White-tailed deer eat the leaves and twigs in the fall, and the fruit is eaten by deer, bear, raccoon, opossums, and various birds, including wild turkey and the cedar waxwing.

Characteristics. The leaves of the common persimmon are deciduous, simple and alternate. They are oval in shape, with smooth borders, and have a shiny green on the upper surface and paler on the bottom surface. The flowers appear in late spring and early summer.

Fruit. The bell-shaped flowers, which are white, cream, or gray, appear in March to June. The fruit is green before ripening and turns orange when ripe. It can range from $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 inches in diameter. The fruit will numb your mouth when eaten green, but is sweet and edible when ripe. The fruit matures in September to November.

Geographic Range. The common persimmon grows in the southeastern portions of the United States. The range extends westward to Texas, Kansas, Ohio and Illinois. It is found as far north as New York State. It is not found, however, in the Appalachian Mountains or the Allegheny Plateau.

Additional Information.

- The black wood of the common persimmon is ideal for heads for driver golf clubs because it is hard and shock resistant. It has also been used for gunstocks, mallets, wedges for splitting tree trunks, and shuttle blocks for cotton looms.
- Green fruit and the inner bark have been used as a treatment for fever, diarrhea, and hemorrhaging.
- Persimmon fruit can be eaten fresh, dried (like plums), used in puddings, pies, and bread. It was also used to make syrup, cider, beer, wine and brandy.
- During the Civil War, seeds were used by the Confederacy to make buttons and were roasted and ground to make a coffee substitute.
- Flowers provide an important nectar source for honey bees.
- The common name, "persimmon," is the Algonquin word for the fruit, which means *choke-fruit* and refers to the dry, puckering feeling in the mouth when the unripe fruit is tasted.
- Common persimmon trees have been reported to be as old as 150 years of age.
- The common persimmon's leaves turn red and yellow in the fall.
- The first written description was by the "Gentleman" of Elvas" in his account of Hernando de Soto expedition to the southeastern United States (1539-1543).
- The French word for persimmon is "plaqueminier."
- Opossums are particularly fond of persimmons and the tree is sometimes called possum wood.
- Green persimmons were used to make an indelible ink.
- Weather folklore has it that local persimmon seed can forecast how severe the winter weather will be. They cut open a persimmon seed and look at the shape of the embryo. A knife shape means a cold icy winter, a fork shape means a mild winter and a spoon shape indicates lots of snow.

References:

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- Briand, C.H. 2005. The common persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana* L.): The history of an underutilized fruit tree (16th – 19th centuries). *Huntia*, 12(1), 71-89; <http://faculty.salisbury.edu/~chbriand/PDFs/Huntia05.pdf>
- The Old Farmer's Almanac website. 2013. *Predicting Weather Using a Persimmon Seed*. <http://www.almanac.com/content/predicting-weather-using-persimmon-seed>

