

Learning about Native Sweet Pecan *Carya illinoensis*



The native sweet pecan, a deciduous nut tree in the hickory family, served as a food source for Native Americans, early settlers, and a large variety of animals. These native trees grow in the Mississippi Valley and prefer a humid moist climate with rainfall in excess of 30 inches and well-drained soils that are not prone to prolonged flooding.

Characteristics. Pecan trees are very large trees. They can reach up to 70 or more feet in height and six feet in diameter. The leaves are alternate and odd pinnate. Each leaf consists of 9-15 leaflets. The margin of the leaflets are serrated. The leaves are green in the spring and summer and turn yellow in the fall. Pecan wood is used as flooring and furniture. They are good shade trees.

Fruit. Flowers are produced in April to May. Nuts, which occur in clusters of 2 to 6, develop in September and October. They are enclosed in a thick green husk that turns to brown and then black as they ripen. The husks dry at maturity and split into four parts revealing the nuts. The pecan nuts fall from September through December. Pecan nuts are generally 1-2 inches in length and ½ to 1 inch in diameter.

Geographic Range. The pecan tree is native to North America. It grows in deep, fertile, well-drained soils of the Mississippi River floodplain. It also grows in Texas and Northern Mexico.

Additional Information.

- The first recorded shipment of pecans to England was documented in 1761.
- The pecan is the state tree of Texas.
- The pecan is the largest of the hickory family.
- Pecan's grow best when it rains more than 30 inches a year.
- Pecan nuts require stratification, which means that they must be held in moist refrigerated conditions until planting in the nursery. In the wild, nuts are best planted shortly after they fall in the autumn.
- Pecan nuts are eaten by a number of birds, squirrels, opossums, raccoons, and pigs.
- The common sweet pecan is the larval host for the Gray Hairstreak (*Strymon melinus*).
- Archeological excavations indicate that early Native Americans (the "mound" builders) gathered and stored pecan nuts as a food source.



Grafixtek, Flickr



S. and A. Wasowski: Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's (TWC) Native Plant Information Network Image Gallery

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