There's an art to collecting these soft fruits in autumn: Don't pick them when they merely **look** ripe.

# Persimmons on Your Plate

Story and Photos
By Susan E. Dees

Persimmons are one of those native Illinois fruits that generate one of two responses to your inquiry—either a blank look or an unpleasant face. Many Illinoisans who grew up in cities or in the northern third of the state have never heard of persimmons. Others may have been the unfortunate brunt of a rite-of-passage joke in which they were handed a perfectly fine, round and orange fruit, told it was delicious, only to feel as if they had eaten an entire lemon after the puckery tannic acid kicked in.

A fully ripe persimmon looks mushy and over-ripe, and tastes somewhat like brown sugar. The genus name, *Disopyros*, is Greek for "food of the gods." Besides tasting rich and delicious, the persimmon also is nutritious, containing generous helpings of iron and vitamins A and C.

My family hails from eastern and southeastern Illinois where persimmons are found and commonly used, especially by the rural folks who live close to the land. I grew up eating many happy Thanksgiving dinners featuring fried quail shot (chew carefully) on family land—hunted with grandad's bird dogs—with persimmon pudding for dessert. My mother sold persimmon pulp and gave away copies of the recipes from Euell Gibbons' book "Stalking the Wild Asparagus" that she (and now I) used. When she wrote him asking permission to give out his recipes, he was delighted.

**Whether raw or in baked goods, persimmons offer a delicious and nutritious treat.**

Persimmons are members of the ebony family and have a distinctive, blocky alligator-skin bark. Portions of the wood are black, and the wood was once prized for golf club heads. Trees become clonal, or their seeds sprout, so that eventually there is a colony. Only the female trees bear fruit. There is no

Persimmon recipes are available at www.fooddownunder.com/cgi- bin/search.cgi?q=persimmon and www.allrecipes.com.

**The bark of a persimmon is likened to the skin of an alligator.**

way of telling if the tree is a female or male for several years. If the tree does not bear fruit, and there are other persimmon trees nearby that could have pollinated it, the tree is a male.

With orange fruits hanging from the branches, persimmon trees are easily seen on fall drives in the countryside. About one inch in diameter, fruits resemble miniature pumpkins, and are ripe around Halloween. Some persimmons ripen before frost and are especially desired, as the "pre-frost" ones are sweeter. But most fruits require a hard frost or two to break down the tannin into sugar.

Ripe persimmons—darkened to a cinnamon color, mushy and laying on the ground—truly look past their prime. There seems to be about an hour window of time before persimmons ferment, so smell each persimmon picked up. Check again as you process the fruits as several may have fermented by the time you get home.

Process persimmons as soon as possible, but they will keep a couple of days in the refrigerator. Wash the fruits to remove bits of grass and stem, then remove the skin and seeds using a sieve or food mill. Pulp stored in a non self-defrosting deep freeze in labeled, recipe-sized one-cup increments in heavy-duty freezer bags will last for several years.

**Orange ripened fruit cling to bare branches.**

## Persimmon Folklore

American folklore says opening persimmon seeds to review the shape of the light-colored heart or germ against the dark background can be used to predict the coming winter weather.

- spoon—the winter will contain lots of heavy, wet snow to be shoveled.
- fork—snow will be light and powdery and the winter mild.
- knife—the winter will contain a cutting, bitter, icy wind.

Although some may swear by this prediction technique, all three shapes are found if one splits open enough persimmon seeds.

If you would prefer not to collect your own persimmons—though that is frankly half the fun of using them—pulp may be purchased at various fall country fairs. The Christian County Historical Society in Taylorville, has held a persimmon festival the first weekend in November each year for at least a decade. Their persimmon cookbook boasts 164 pages of mainly dessert and salad recipes—many given out as samples during the festival. They even serve delicious persimmon ice cream.

If you are lucky enough to find a persimmon tree and beat the raccoons, deer, opossums and other humans to the delicious fruits, you are in for a treat. Try different recipes and then show your friends what persimmons really taste like.

Susan E. Dees is a biologist with the Illinois Department of Transportation specializing in endangered species, high quality habitats and wetlands, and has cooked with persimmons for 25 years.

**Removing the skin and seeds from persimmons is easy when using a simple, old-fashioned food processor.**