



Notes from River Farm

An Autumn Windfall of Persimmons

by David J. Ellis

OF ALL THE wonderful plants that grow here at River Farm, perhaps the one that regularly draws the most attention from visitors is the Asian persimmon (*Diospyros kaki*, USDA Hardiness Zone 7–9, AHS Heat Zone 10–7), which from late September into November puts on a dramatic show of day-glo orange fruits. These orblike fruits, which reach three or four inches in diameter and have a filmy white

sheen or bloom on their skins, hang dramatically from the tree's bare stems for several weeks until they are harvested or ripen enough to become windfalls.

The two Asian persimmons on the grounds grow in company with apple trees in a small orchard planted on a hill in the middle of a circular driveway. This prominent location means anyone arriving at River Farm is treated to this colorful spectacle.

Much more subtle in appearance are the fruits of the common persimmon (*D. virginiana*, Zones 4–9, 9–1), native throughout the East Coast and westward to the Great Plains and Texas. Common persimmon has smaller fruits than its Asian counterpart, but they also turn an attractive yellow to orange as they ripen in the fall.

There are several native persimmons scattered around River Farm, mostly in woodlands along the periphery of the property. Unlike the Asian persimmon, their fruits begin to develop before the foliage drops, which sometimes yields a pleasing combination of the orange fruits and attractive yellow- to purple-colored autumn leaves. In winter, common persimmon is distinguished by its handsome, fissured bark, often likened to alligator hide.

Both persimmons have edible fruits and, contrary to popular belief, they don't require a hard frost to ripen, just sufficient time. The common persimmon has such a reputation for mouth-puckering sourness and astringency if eaten unripe, however, that many people shy away from trying it. According to Lee Reich, author of *Uncommon Fruits Worthy of Attention*, common



Janet Walker, AHS director of horticulture, harvests ripe fruits from an Asian persimmon tree growing at River Farm.

persimmons “must be as soft as an over-ripe tomato before they are fit to eat.”

Some cultivars of Asian persimmon are astringent until they ripen, but non-astringent cultivars such as ‘Fuyu’ and ‘Ichikikeijiro’ are available. These varieties have the additional benefit that they can be eaten while they are still quite firm, which makes eating them out of hand less messy.

Persimmons vary in their pollination requirements; some strains have male and female flowers on separate trees, and others are bisexual. Many strains of Asian persimmon will set seedless fruit without needing fertilization of the flowers. On the other hand, most, but

Sources

Edible Landscaping, Afton, VA. (800) 524-4156. EL@cstone.net. Catalog free. *D. kaki* ‘Ichikikeijiro’; *D. virginiana* and cultivars.

Sonoma Antique Apple Nursery, Healdsburg, CA. (707) 433-6420. www.applenursery.com. Catalog free. *D. kaki* ‘Fuyu’ and other cultivars; *D. virginiana* and cultivars.

Resources

Uncommon Fruits Worthy of Attention by Lee Reich is out of print, but a CD-ROM version is available for \$17 through the following Web site: www.woodstocktimes.com/books.htm

not all, common persimmons require cross pollination. For most reliable fruit set, especially with American persimmons, it is best to plant two or three trees together, including at least one male and one female tree.

If you've never tried persimmons before, look for Asian varieties at your grocery store or farmer's market this fall. When ripe, they are sweet as honey with a delicious flavor that makes you understand why the botanical name for the genus, *diospyros*, translates to “food of the gods.”

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