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## **Spoon, Fork, or Knife??**

October in Alabama is absolutely one of the best times of the entire year. We not only get fall leaf color, cooler and less humid weather, in the home garden we get a swap from summer squash and cucumbers to typical fall crops such as turnips or collards or perhaps even cabbage, and there is even Halloween and trick or treating to boot. One additional thing that October usually brings and that is persimmons.

I got my first real lesson with persimmons at an early age. My grandfather that I always affectionately called “Pap” used to take me over to the persimmon trees that always grew next to the cotton fields where we were picking (yes, unfortunately I have experienced picking cotton by hand) where we would usually pick up a few persimmons that the opossums, raccoons, and deer had graciously left us. Persimmons are an absolutely fantastic fruit that is virtually without comparison among other fruits. It didn’t take long for me to become a persimmon “expert”. That is where the first lesson came in. This young self proclaimed persimmon expert soon learned his first lesson in astringency! Astringency is a term that I affectionately refer to as the “pucker effect”. Common or “wild” persimmons are astringent...very astringent which means they must ripen and soften (usually after first frost) before they become sweet enough to eat. I bit into one unripe persimmon and till this day I think my entire face is still turned inside out! Like I said, lesson one ... have patience.

A recent caller reminded me of a bit of persimmon folklore that I had all but forgotten. According to legend, persimmons can actually predict what type of winter that we are going to have. Take a few persimmon seed and cut them in half longitudinally or “long ways” if you prefer. You will notice the embryo of what will someday become a new persimmon tree.

Typically (and with some degree of imagination) you can see one of three shapes... a spoon, a knife, or a fork! A spoon means that it will be a “heavy winter”. I got a clarification from one of my more Northern friends that a heavy winter means lots of snow. The spoon hence represents lots of shoveling. A knife shape represents a “cutting cold” winter that is so cold the wind “cuts like a knife”. Finally the fork represents a mild winter with only a dusting of sleet, snow, or ice. I’m not sure how accurate the persimmons actually are at predicting weather but they have to be at least almost as accurate as all the “weather guessers” as I call them on the nightly news.

Native persimmons are dioecious meaning that there are separate male and female trees, and both must be present in order to produce fruit. In addition to a wonderful edible fruit, persimmons can also be used in cooking such things as cookies, breads, and cakes. I recently found a recipe for persimmon pudding that I am anxious to try. They also have a very long and storied history. During civil war times when coffee and similar commodities were in very short supply, Confederate soldiers boiled persimmon seeds as a coffee substitute. As much as I like persimmons, I think I will stick to Maxwell House for my coffee fix, thank you. For those of you who are golfers, it is persimmon wood that is often used to make wooden golf club heads and even billiard cue sticks.

Common persimmon grows in a wide range of climates and soil conditions. It grows best in moist well drained areas but can also tolerate dry locations. It prefers to be in full sun; however, it withstands competition from other trees and shade very nicely. Persimmon has a very distinct and quite attractive bark that is dark gray to black in color and is broken into almost perfect square blocks. It is one of the most recognizable trees in the forest by the bark alone much less the fruit that seem to have been produced in abundance this year.

While most people are familiar with our native or common persimmon, most people are still unfamiliar with its relative the oriental persimmon. Oriental persimmons are relatively easy to grow; however, they are less cold tolerant than our native persimmon. Mine got killed back during the late Easter freeze of '07. As compared to the common persimmons I used to pick up off the ground with my grandfather when I was a kid, the oriental persimmons are huge in size.

They come in two basic but very distinct categories...astringent and non-astringent. Remember lesson one from above! The astringent varieties just like our native persimmons must ripen and soften before they are edible..remember larger persimmons mean larger pucker effect! There is

another group of oriental persimmons, however, the non-astringent type. The non-astringent varieties can be eaten before they soften and are excellent whether eaten firm or allowed to soften. Some non-astringent varieties to try in our area include Fuyu and Jiro. If you prefer your persimmons on the softer side, storing them (once they are fully colored) in a loosely closed plastic bag with a banana or apple can speed the process along. Freezing them until they are solid and thawing them can remove some (but not all) of the astringency.

If persimmons are a fruit that you are interested in or just simply enjoy, you can contact the Walker County Extension Office for more information on either native “common” persimmon or oriental persimmons.