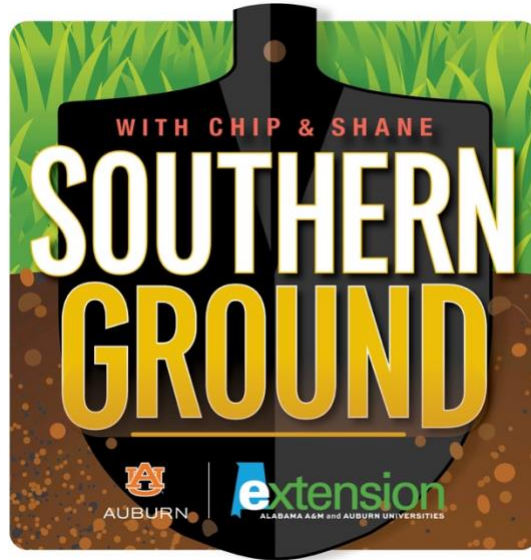




Season 1 Episode 23—Going Nuts Over Pecans

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Announcer

Welcome to the *Southern Ground* podcast provided by Alabama Extension through Auburn University. Extension educators Shane Harris and Dr. Chip East discuss seasonal lawn and garden topics, address common questions, and provide the practical solutions you want to know. Let's dig in to our southern ground.

Shane Harris

Hello everyone, and welcome to *Southern Ground*. I'm Shane Harris, and sitting beside me again is Dr. Chip East. Hey, Chip.

Chip East

Hey, Shane. How are you?

Shane Harris

I'm good. Hey, we've got another topic for you that, lots of questions, lots of questions. I'm on turn on Chip today. I going put him in the spot a little bit. I'm going to come across this podcast as the angry homeowner that's upset today because my pecan tree is not producing. So, Dr. East, are you ready?

Chip East

I'm ready. I answer a lot of pecan questions, Shane. Usually they are nice people, though, and not angry.

Shane Harris

Oh, I heard you answer pecan question just this morning I think when I walked in to do this podcast with you. But a common question we get, especially in the late season as pecans are supposed to be harvested typically October, November is pecans.... They are not there. Trees not producing pecan. So, Mr. Extension agent over here across from me, that's got over 25 years of experience. What's wrong with my tree? How come I don't have any pecans?, Dr. East.

Chip East

Well, there are several reasons why. And everything needs to go your way to make pecans. But we'll take it one step at a time. There are several insects and disease issues that effect pecans. If I could wave a magic wand, I can't. Well, I could wave it, but it wouldn't do anything right.

Shane Harris

You wouldn't see it, they are listening and they wouldn't see it.

Chip East

If I could wave a magic wand and make one pecan problem go away, it would be this disease called scab, s-c-a-b. Scab. And sometimes would just say pecan scab. Because it's so prevalent on pecans, it makes a black spots on the leaf and black on the shuck. And our nut falls off early. Well, we're in the South and we have a lot of rain. It's a fungal problem. If we were in a drier climate, that wouldn't be a big problem. But it's a major problem for us. Pecan scab, that's what makes that shuck black in the nut fall off early. That's the only disease I'll talk about, I think.

Shane, there's an insect that we have issues with early in the spring called a pecan phylloxera. And it'll lay eggs on the leaflet of a pecan, and it'll cause these little bumps on the leaf and sometimes that leaf will...well, we're not doing photosynthesis wherever we have this bump at. And sometimes that part of that leaf can drop off early as well. So that hurts pecan production.

Shane Harris

Well, Dr. East, I had pecans last year and it's had pecans the last ten years. How come I don't have any pecans this time? What's wrong with they're not filled out. They're just small and shape and size.

Chip East

We don't have the same exact problems every year. We don't have the same rain. We don't have the same insect pressures from one year to the next. And you'll see a one year good, one year bad, a dry year we wouldn't have scab as bad. Some years I'll see a lot of pecan phylloxera. Someone may have it bad, but another person not at all. So, it's not consistent at every location. Another insect we get probably the most questions about is fall webworm. Fall webworm, Shane, you want to describe it?

Shane Harris

Yeah. You'll see a mass of webbing on the end of a pecan branch. We see that, mid-summer to late fall. That's just an insect that's been laid by a moth. And the caterpillars will get in there and work on the foliage. The end of the leaves and eat that. It's typically not a big deal. It's just more of a cosmetic damage on that.

Chip East

I saw a lot of that lately. But what you said is correct. I don't like it, I wish it wasn't there, but that's not causing me not to have pecans.

Another insect. Shane I shouldn't have a favorite because I'd rather not have any of these insects. But a twig girdler is just an interesting little insect. It will go lay eggs on the end of a branch, and they'll do this in hickory too, as well as the pecan. Pecan and hickory is in the same genus, *carya*. But anyway, they will lay the eggs on the stem, they'll go girdle, chew around the stem, it'll look like you almost did it with a knife or some kind of tool, and that limb will actually break off and fall to the ground. We need to get those up when these little branches fall and burn or throw away in your trash. Don't put them in the edge of the yard in a brush pile. They're just going to continue to develop. Burn that limb or throw that limb away.

Stinkbug is another insect we have problems with. Before that nut hardens, this stinkbug will put its sucking mouth part into that pecan and feed. Later in the year, when we crack that pecan, we'll see this black spot on our pecan. Well, that's stinkbug damage from earlier in the summer.

Shane Harris

Will that be why my pecans didn't fill out or not as good this year in shape and size? Why are they rotting in the shell?

Chip East

All of these things collectively may be our problem, but stinkbug itself no, they can still fill out good. If you only had stinkbug problems, you'd have spots on the nut it would still fill out. Another is the aphids. There's a black aphid and yellow pecan aphid. They're sucking the plant. They're on the little branches. And I wish they wasn't there. Again scab is the major problem. And we do spray for aphids or a pecan farmer would a homeowner wouldn't spray it all.

The secret to pecan production is maintaining healthy foliage to increase carbohydrate reserves. So how do we maintain healthy foliage? Well, if we didn't have any of these pest, that would be one. If we could.... And we'll talk about these things maybe individually, but nutrition, weed control, mulch, irrigation those are the things we can do to maintain healthy foliage. I can predict Shane or go out, drive down the road in the fall of the year, the middle of November every year, like the 20th of November, I go take a picture of our pecan trees. I do a pecan presentation, and I show these pictures from one year to the next, and I got pictures that goes back many, many years. This pecan planting on our farm. There's four pecan trees in a row. The second tree is the best tree. The others are not this good. Why do I say the second tree's the best tree? When I take that picture in the middle of November? Actually, again, the 20th is a little later in November. That tree will still have a lot of its leaves still on it. The other three trees will not have hardly any leaves. Well, what makes the trees fall off? Well some kind of stress, whether it be from insect, whether it be from disease, whether it be from a drought stress. Again, that's

where the mulching and irrigation may come in. But that tree would be my best tree. So same thing to the homeowner. If you only got two trees, we're not going to cut any down, but we're going to do whatever we can do to make that tree hold its leaves the longest into the year.

Shane Harris

All right, I'm gonna ask you another question that we get a lot that relate to this. The response of what you just described to us. Well, my papa planted this tree 50, 70 something years ago. It's had all these pecans when he was young. Even when I was a child. But why are these issues occurring now? How come all these bugs and disease are showing up on my tree now, when he used to have pecans decades ago? Trying to throw him a curveball y'all, I'm trying to stump him.

Chip East

If you drive down the road in Alabama and see a pecan tree, you can call it a 'Stewart', you'll probably be right half the time. So, half of our trees are 'Stewart', it's that common. 'Stewart' started getting scab. It was resistant for a while, but it started scabbing many years ago. So we really don't recommend 'Stewart' anymore. But those are a lot of the trees that were planted. So again, our resistance has run out. It's not resistant anymore. And that tree is 70 years older than it was many.... a while back and it's not as productive. But the disease resistance is one thing that.....There's trees that I don't recommend now, that I was recommending 20 years ago because of.... they started scabbing, they started getting this scab. This scab means business. It's the number one problem.

Shane Harris

In reality, the pecan trees that we have today, 75-100, possibly even more than that. A lot of them are just have turned into basically shade trees. And as Chip described, if you're not managing these pecans, you're not taking care of them. You're not doing a test, you're not fertilizing, you're not spraying. As homeowners, you probably don't have the equipment to spray. You got the insect and disease issues. You can't control the weather. You can't control the hurricanes. You can't control the drought. What you can control is planting new varieties or cultivars that are disease resistant to the things that Chip talked about. And so what we've encouraged a lot of people at pecan workshops and through videos and in articles is people need to be planting new cultivar, varieties. Because what we do have are old, old, old pecans that are not productive. And they have lots of issues and they're basically a shade tree. And you may or may not ever get any pecans.

Chip East

That's right, Shane. So let's talk about the things that we can do. Because I never recommend a homeowner to spray their pecan tree. That's something farmers do and they can make pecans often. But that's just not something we're going to do. So let's say we've got some old trees that's been there forever. And it kind of depends on how close they are and how many of them you have. Let's say you got 50. Well if you got 50, we could probably take some out. We can increase the air circulation. How close together are they?

Well if I was planting a new tree, I would plant them 80 to 100ft apart. But a lot of these trees that were planted in orchards are 30ft apart. Well, a farmer will plant that close together, but after so many years, they'll cut a

bunch of them out. So, if you're not planning on cutting any out, we don't need to plant them as close together to begin with. So, if I've already got them close together, I could say, well, you need to cull some. You need to take some out. The problem is, which ones do you take out? Well, keep up with production and keep up with when the tree loses its leaves. I wouldn't want to cut one that lost its leaves late and leave one that lost its leaves early. So pay attention for 2 or 3 years before we decide which ones to cut. But thinning could be something we could do that would increase production. It's just cutting a few trees. Maybe I'm cutting a sweet gum or water oak that's nearby, that's not even a pecan. I don't know, we just want to increase, circulate air circulation because of that scab disease. So that's something we can do. And you're right. If we're planting more, we'd plant them further apart, but we'd plant some that are scab resistant and we're not going to plant 'Stewart' and 'Desirable'.

Not that they're... They are good pecans if they can be sprayed. But there's several I could name. You can go to our website and look at but 'Amling', 'Kanza'.... I'm leaving a few out 'Headquarters', 'Lakota', 'McMillan', 'Elliott', 'Gafford'. You know 'Elliott' is an old one. It's a small nut and people I don't want to lose small. Well all pecans scab, Elliott will scab but not bad. Well, I'd rather have a small nut that fills out than a large nut that I never get to eat a pecan from. And a lot of people say, well, I want a big nut that fills out. Well, I could say I want a big truck that gets 100 miles to the gallon. Well, they don't make those. It's give and take. I want a grass that stays green year-round and I never have to mow it. Well, sure you do. That's like saying if we had large pecans that always filled out, who would be planting the small ones? Nobody. Everybody wants that. So it's give and take on that.

Shane Harris

One thing to keep in mind is if you decide to plant new pecan trees, like you would any kind of fruit trees, one do your research, do your homework. Refer to our Extension publications. There's lots of great pecan publications out there from multiple universities, multiple land-grant universities, and Extension services all over across the southeast. And Chip, I want you to talk about this next, because you got to have two different kinds of cultivars. You just do out several names that are on the list, but you have to have at least two trees, two different types of trees in order to have proper pollination. If they're not pollinated, folks are still not going to have any pecans.

Chip East

Shane, it's interesting that a pecan tree puts off a lot of pollen. One pecan tree has enough pollen to pollinate every other country in the world, if they were close enough, obviously they are not. So, if your neighbors have pecans and you can see them, like the wind can blow it to your tree and they are wind pollinated, it might not matter which variety I plant for pollination. But if there's no other pecan trees around me. But if your neighbors are making pecans, then I would assume pollination is going on and it wouldn't ... may not matter what I plant, I could just plant one. But if I'm where no other pecan trees are at, we call them type one and type two. But the male part will bloom and then a couple of weeks later the female is receptive. In the other, the female blooms, is receptive, and then a couple of weeks later, the male pollen sheds. So you got to have a mixture of type one. You can have one, type one and a whole bunch of type two's or vice versa. But I try to have some type one's and type two's planted.

Shane Harris

Okay Dr. East. So we've got this pecan issues. You've educated me as a homeowner, landowner. I need to put out new pecans. But what do I need to do with these existing pecans? I don't want to cut them down. I want to keep them. They've done fairly well over years, but just not as productive as they used to be. You mentioned fertilizer and lime and taken a soil test. What do I need to do when it comes to providing the nutrients? You said I can't control the scab, without buying new resistant cultivars, I don't have the equipment to spray. I really don't have the space for new varieties at this moment. Is there anything I can do?

Chip East

So we're going to manage the trees you have. And again, if you've got a lot of trees and they're close together, taking some out is not a bad option. That sounds crazy, but oftentimes production goes up when we take a few trees out. But if all you had was three trees, I probably wouldn't want to take any out. So let's just say we just got a few. If I had 50, I might do it differently. But let's just say you got 2 or 3,...4, something like that. We're going to manage these trees the best we can so we can't spray. I don't ever recommend a homeowner spraying. We can't plant new varieties. This is it. We're going to manage what we got. So weed control around the tree. So weed control is if I could go 15ft diameter around that tree it could be wider and have no grass, no weeds, just bare ground. And then a lot of people say, well, I'm not getting rid of my grass. And also a lot of people tuned out already when I said that, but that helps. And then I don't like bare ground, it erodes.

So, I want to mulch that area. So, pine straw, pine bark, there's other things we could use, but if it's in your yard, I want to mulch with whatever your landscapes mulched with. If you have pine straw in your landscape, I would mulch my pecan tree with pine straw. So weed control, mulching, and then let's talk irrigation. Now if that tree is way off in the pasture somewhere, that's hard to do. But if it's in your yard, you really can't irrigate a tree enough during the months of August and September. That's when that nutlet is really filling out, is in August and September, and usually it's pretty dry those times of year. September is really dry, usually at my house, but if we could irrigate the tree in August and September, I'm not talking about spraying water up in the tree, I'm talking about the ground. So, if we could wet the ground under that tree, if we don't get a rain periodically, I would be irrigating the tree. That's what we can do. And then the next thing is fertility. Shane.

Shane Harris

Don't guess, take a soil test. We've talked about soil testing on one of our earlier podcast. Take a soil test, find out what exactly what you need because there is a combination of fertilizer, lime, and even zinc sulfate that you may have to put around those trees. And then there's a based on how much age of year, how much space you got, things like that. So you can control the fertilization. You can't control all these environmental conditions, the age of the tree, some of the insect and disease problems. But you can control the amount of fertilizer and the lime that you put out. That's what you need to invest a lot of your time in.

Chip East

That's correct. And so I highly recommend the soil test. I don't know what the pH is. I want the pH to be right to be around 6.0, 6.1, 6.2, something like that I don't know unless we soil test. So you're right.

Shane Harris

And you got to do that a certain time of year. November is too late. Midsummer's too late. We've got to do this in February and March and maybe another application in late spring to early summer. So there is a combination of when you need to get it out at the appropriate time. A lot of our trees have not been fertilized, not been limed in years or decades. What you're hearing from us, just having the tree out there and if it produces, it does or does not on its own, you need it. As Chip has described, you need to take a little more action, a little bit more responsibility, and managing the tree to at least help it be more productive.

Chip East

More elements or more available for the plant at a pH of around 6. So that's why I say we want 6.1, 6.2, something like that, 6.3. It may take a year or two for that lime to get down in the soil. When we're just spreading it out on top, so you're not going to see results instantly.

But I will...I do have a list of like a general fertilizer, fertility guidelines and all. So we need to know how old the tree is. So it's, we put 1 pound of triple 13 per year age of the tree, up to 25 pounds per tree. So if you're tree's two years old you put 2 pounds trip 13. If it's ten years old, 10 pounds. If it's 20 years old, 20 pounds, 25 years old, 25 pounds. But if it's 100 years old, we're still just putting 25 pounds of triple 13. And you can find that at any farm supply. Plus we put 1 pound of 34-0-0. That's a nitrogen fertilizer. You can find it anywhere. But we put 1 pound of 34-0-0 per year age of the tree, up to 20 pounds per tree. So, if it's one year old, its 1 pound. Ten years old, 10 pounds. Twenty years old, 20 pound, but beyond that you're still just 20 pounds. Then we put a 10th of a pound of zinc, you mentioned zinc. A farmer can spray, sometimes we spray that. But for homeowner we're just going to put it on the ground. So we'll buy the zinc. It's one tenth of a pound of zinc per year age of the tree up to 2 pounds per tree. And we do this, it kind of depends on where you live it. But about the time they start leafing out good. So I would say April is when we do it, we can put all the triple 13 and half of the 34-0-0 out at, we'll just say April, and then we could wait till June and put the other half out.

Shane Harris

Dr. East, from this homeowner standpoint.....We also get questions.... Well, how come my pecans did good this year but seemed like they didn't do as good last year? There seem to be good years and bad years when it comes to getting pecans.

Chip East

Pecan trees are alternate bearers, and some varieties do that more than others, where if you have a heavy year, one year, you may have a light year the next. What happens is, if you have a.... A pecan tree has to put on 6 or 8 inches of growth this year to make nuts next year. If you have a heavy year, we're not putting on a lot of new growth, so the next year's light. Well, that light year, you probably are putting on a lot of growth, so the next year could be heavy. Now when I say it's heavy, scab can come in. That doesn't mean you make nuts. It just means it may set a lot of nuts. So a lot of people will go during a heavy year and maybe in August, add another 10 pounds of 34-0-0, a little more nitrogen. But it's kind of the opposite, a lot of people think, well in a light year

I need fertilize. Well no, the light year, you are probably fine. It's putting on growth. It's that heavy year we might give them more nitrogen.

Chip East

The next thing we'll talk about, Shane, is we know how much fertilizer to put. We know what time of year to put it. But where do I put it under this tree? Do I have to go round under the trunk and pour it all out? Well, we go from the base of the tree...We fertilize from the base of the tree, one and a half times the drip line. So, where's the drip line at? The furthest, how far the branches come away from the tree. One and a half times that distance. So, we're actually going beyond where the branches come with our fertilizer and we evenly spread it. We do that with lime too, but we evenly spread the fertilizer from the base of the tree, way past where the branches are, the feeder roots or root hairs that actually take in nutrients are on the tips of the roots. So just think about that as we are fertilizing. The tips of the roots are not just right up under... in one spot. They're all in that area and beyond the drip line.

Shane Harris

As you can tell, Dr. East knows his information about pecans. And so, me being the little cranky homeowner, that's fussing about his pecans, not doing too well was on purpose. And Dr. Chip you passed, I give you an A-plus on your performance review. Chip has done this at several... many years, and I knew he would answer these questions very well. He is very detailed, very passionate about pecan production and leads a lot of workshops, and videos, and publications for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. So, if you're having issues with pecans and you've turned to this pecan podcast today...We've thrown a lot of information out there, including what Chip gave you a formula of what to put out when it comes to the fertilization. All this is written down. We have it in publications. We have it in our literature. Dr. East and other agents, with us will be happy to share that information with you if you're having issues. You're going to have issues with pecans. So, at some point you will have to decide, am I going to put the management time into it, like Dr. East described, or is it just going to be a shade tree? Or, do I need to plant new pecans or do I need to go buy pecans? Those are the options hopefully from this podcast we've given you, in this case, lots of information, but also that you can be educated and make those appropriate decisions.

Chip East

Shane, these issues are what our pecan farmers deal with every year. Our pecan farmers do an outstanding job of managing the trees so we can...they will have something for us to eat. They do a phenomenal job, and I appreciate the work they do for us.

Shane Harris

Yeah, pecans are a great crop here for the southeast. We enjoy them, especially around the holiday season. Those pecan candies, pecan pies, sort of ranks up there like the peaches that we talked about. They're good eating, but can be very difficult to grow, especially from a homeowner standpoint. So anytime you're growing fruit trees or pecans or tomatoes or whatever, you need to know what you getting involved with. But also, you need the facts so that you can be successful. And we want you to be successful.

So, reach out to any land-grant university nationwide through their Extension services, and they'll be happy to help you answer these farming and gardening questions. We thank you for listening to our podcast here at *Southern Ground*. And if you need anything else, tune to our website, www.aces.edu. We're with Alabama Cooperative Extension through Auburn University and we are here to help you out any way we can. You did good Dr. East, thank you for partnering with us on this *Southern Ground* podcast.

Chip East

Thank you all for joining us for another episode of *Southern Ground*.

Announcer

Southern Ground has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.