

# Persimmon

## Grow

A persimmon is a fruit that grows on a tree. Persimmon is referred to in ancient literature as “food for the gods”. This led to its classification in the genus *Diospyros*. “Dios” means God. “Pyros” means grain or food. The English word, persimmon, is derived from the Algonquian language, *pessemin*, meaning “dry fruit”. The American persimmon, species *D. virginiana*, is native to North America, mostly on the East Coast but can also be found as far west as Louisiana, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. It was a food staple of the early Native Americans, who introduced it to the colonists. The Asian persimmon, *D. kaki* species, is native to China. The *D. kaki* species is divided into two categories: astringent (Hachiya) and non-astringent (Fuyu). California produces the most persimmons in the U.S., of the *D. kaki* species. The American persimmons now only account for less than one percent of the country’s total crop production. Even though it is more cold-hardy than the Asian variety, many of its cultivars are too soft for shipping so the American persimmon was never widely cultivated for commercial production.<sup>1-4</sup>

**Fun Fact:** Early Native Americans ate persimmons raw, dried, brewed into beer, or cooked into gruel, cornbread and pudding.<sup>1-4</sup>

## Choose

American persimmons are smaller and more round than the Asian variety. Asian persimmons, *D. Kaki* species, are the most common in the U.S. The Hachiya variety is an acorn-shaped persimmon with a bright, deep orange-red color. It must be very soft before it is edible. It is used mostly for baking. The Fuyu variety is light orange and has a spherical shape, similar to a pumpkin. It may be eaten raw when firm or soft. It is said that persimmons should never be picked but allowed to fall from the tree as an indication of true ripeness. Tarps can be placed at the base of the tree to collect the harvest. For any variety, choose persimmons with deep saturated color.<sup>1-4</sup>



## Store

In North Carolina, persimmons are in season September to October. A persimmon will continue to ripen after harvest. Store at room temperature. To hasten ripening, you can store persimmons in a paper bag at room temperature or next to apples or other produce that emit natural ethylene gas. Monitor ripeness and plan to use as soon as possible. Refrigeration is not advised as it may affect the texture, taste and overall quality. The pulp may be extracted and frozen for later baking.<sup>1-2,4-5</sup>

**Fun Fact:** Persimmon trees are cultivated not only for their edible fruit, but also for wood (material for golf clubs, furniture, etc.), forage (pollen and nectar for bees and butterflies, food for wildlife), and beautification. This fruit is such a favorite of wildlife, that the trees are nicknamed “possumwood” and the fruit “deer candy”.<sup>1</sup>

## Use

Ripe persimmons may be eaten raw as a snack or side dish. They may be incorporated into salads, baked in breads or puddings, or dried. To eat a fresh ripe Hachiya, cut an X in the back and peel back the skin to access the pulp. For both Fuyu and American persimmons, remove the cap and slice into wedges to eat. Before preparing or eating, always wash fruit very well under clean, running water.<sup>1-2</sup>

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## Teach

Persimmon trees are deciduous. Although they adapt to a wide range of soils and climates, they do not produce well in high summer heat or desert-like conditions. In the other extreme, they can withstand temperatures as low as 0°F when dormant. They are immune from most insects and diseases. The trees are usually dioecious (either male or female), but some are monoecious, having both male and female flowers, which can affect pollination and fruit production. Trees bear fruit 2-3 years after grafting and can have a life span of about 10 years.<sup>1,3</sup>

### Class Activity - Cultural Connections

Persimmons have a rich history in Native American and Asian cultures. Ask students to research the origin and history of persimmons and share with the class what they learned.

**Fun Fact:** The persimmon is Japan's national fruit.<sup>1</sup>

### Class Activity - Weather Forecasting

Persimmons are thought to hold a special starring role in winter weather-predicting folklore. Once split in half, the seed kernels of persimmons can be seen, where they may reveal the shape of a fork, spoon or knife. A fork predicts a mild winter. A spoon predicts needing a shovel for snow. A knife predicts bitter cold temperatures.

### Materials Needed:

- Variety of washed local persimmons, a few whole and some cut in half; persimmon seeds cut in half
- Paper plates and napkins

### Steps: \*Use food safety steps. Wash hands and produce.

1. Have students compare and contrast the varieties of persimmon - American and Asian.
2. Offer samples of washed, cut ripe persimmon for students to taste.
3. Examine the cut seeds as a class. Do students see a spoon, fork or knife? Count how many of each. Discuss what this means for the winter weather prediction. Hint: Local persimmons should offer a more accurate prediction for the local winter weather.<sup>6</sup>

## Eat

One persimmon (2 ½ inch) has about 118 calories. It is free of cholesterol and low in fat and sodium. This fruit is an excellent source of fiber and manganese and a good source of vitamin A, B6 and C. Persimmons are also sources of vitamin E, lycopene, zeaxanthin and lutein.<sup>7</sup>

Soluble fiber helps lower blood cholesterol. Insoluble fiber aids digestion. Manganese helps with forming bone and converting carbohydrate, protein and fat into energy. Vitamin A promotes normal vision, supports the growth and health of cells and tissue, protects us from infection, and helps regulate the immune system. Vitamin B6 helps our body make protein building blocks (amino acids), turn tryptophan into niacin and serotonin (a brain messenger), and make hemoglobin, insulin, and antibodies to fight infection. Vitamin C helps form collagen to hold muscles, bones and tissues together, protects us from infections and bruising, aids in healing, keeps our gums healthy, helps our body absorb iron and folate from plants, and acts as an antioxidant to prevent cell damage. Vitamin E helps with immune function, acts as an antioxidant, and neutralizes free radicals which may damage cells. Lycopene is a phytonutrient that may reduce cancer risk. Lutein and zeaxanthin may help maintain normal vision.<sup>5,7</sup>

**Fun Fact:** The art of hoshigaki, hand-dried persimmons, is part of traditional Japanese New Year's celebrations.<sup>1</sup>

## Find

For more persimmon info and resources, visit:

1. California Harvest of the Month, <http://harvestofthemonth.cdph.ca.gov>
2. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, School Nutrition, <https://dpi.wi.gov/school-nutrition/programs/fresh-fruit-vegetable>
3. University of Wisconsin, <http://uncommonfruit.cias.wisc.edu/american-persimmon/>
4. North Carolina State Extension, [www.ces.ncsu.edu](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu)
5. N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, [www.ncagr.gov](http://www.ncagr.gov)
6. Old Farmers Almanac, [www.almanac.com](http://www.almanac.com)
7. USDA Food Composition Databases, <http://ndb.nal.usda.gov>
8. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)