

## Persimmons: Nature's Sugar-Plum



*A persimmon tree loaded with fruit*



*Closeup of persimmons still on the tree*

“While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads”. We are all familiar with the favorite poem, “Twas the Night Before Christmas,” but have you ever wondered exactly what ARE sugar-plums? Turns out the regional term refers to a succulent orange-colored fruit that ripens in the late fall months that usually coincide with several hard frosts.

These trees dot the countryside this time of year, it's branches laden down with sweet treats. Long after all the other fruit trees have born their tasty treasures, the sugar-plum has plenty to spare. The fruit is about an inch or so in diameter and is a dull orange in color. When ripe, it has a luscious sweetness few other fruits can match. But woe to the unsuspecting soul who pops one in his mouth when underripe! Immediately the mouth turns inside out and becomes one involuntary pucker. The astringent qualities of the fruit are unforgettable.

If you haven't guessed, the sugar-plum tree is commonly known as the persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*). For every hiking enthusiast or autumn hunter, the tree offers a sugary treat whenever encountered in the wild. The tall spindly trees are usually found in around cleared off land, heavy with thickets and open spaces where the sun can reach down and work its magic. There's a widespread belief that persimmons are only fit to eat after several heavy frosts. Facts are that only time, warmth, and sunlight can bring the fruit to perfection and many times this can't be accomplished until after the first frost comes.

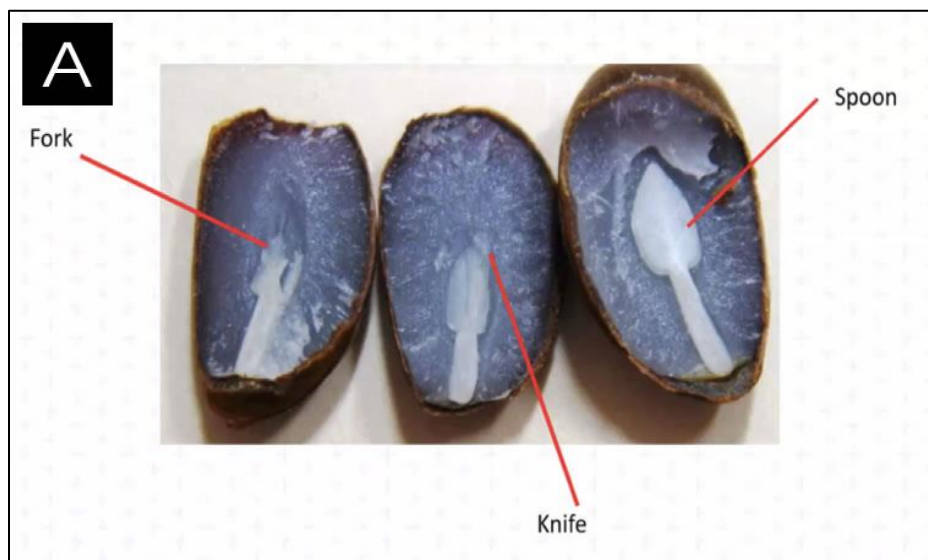


Folklore notes that winter weather can be predicted from the inside of a persimmon seed. If the seed of a locally grown persimmon tree is split in half, the shape inside (the cotyledon) will have one of three utensils showing; a fork, a spoon, or a knife. If a spoon is visible there will be a lot of snow. A fork means a mild abundance of snow. A knife predicts a

biting cold that "cuts like a knife."

**"Spoon" inside a persimmon seed; lots of snow for 2022**

Many say these signs are accurate but like the wooly-worms predicting a terrible winter if the worms are solid black, it is left to one's judgement.



**Photo of all three variations of seeds predicting weather**

Along with just eating the small fruit right from the tree or picking them up on the ground after they fall, the best way to gather ripe persimmons is to spread a cloth or plastic sheet under the tree and give some low hanging branches a couple of good shakes. Pick out the twigs and you'll have an abundance of fresh fruit to take home and make into something delicious.

I've experimented with several recipes that have been tested in my kitchen and can vouch for its tasty, hearty flavor. One of my favorites is persimmon/hickory nut bread. I got this recipe from Euell Gibbons book, "*Stalking the Wild Asparagus*". This dark brown, moist bread is delicious hot or cold, making it a welcome addition to any fall meal or just an afternoon snack. There are also various other recipes for persimmon pie, cake, and a thick, gooey pudding that's perfect with a generous blob of whipping cream on top.

If you are lucky enough to find a wild hickory tree or perhaps a black walnut, you won't have to substitute with store-bought walnuts or pecans. For the outdoor adventurer, cracking the wild nuts and digging the meats from the shell is a lot more work but intensely satisfying knowing some of the ingredients have been gathered from the earth.



### **Persimmon-Hickory Nut Bread**

Sift two cups regular flour and one teaspoon baking soda together. In a separate bowl, cream one cup of sugar and 1-1/2 sticks of butter. Add two well-beaten eggs and stir. Mix slowly with the flour and soda mixture. Add one-half pint (one cup) of persimmon pulp (extracted with a hand mill) and one-half cup hickory, black walnut or other nut meats and stir into a stiff batter. Pour into a well-greased loaf pan and bake at 325 degrees for one hour or until an inserted knife comes out clean. Cool on a wire rack for about ten minutes before removing from pan. All that's left to do is fix yourself a nice hot cup of tea, put your feet up and enjoy a slice of this delicious dark sweet bread made from "sugar plums!" **Left: Pulp being extracted**



**Loaves of persimmon-hickory nut sweet bread**