

Peggy's Persimmon Paradise

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Situated in Mount Beasor, just outside of Sopchoppy, is a private gardener's fruit paradise. Peggy Martin has been seriously dabbling in fruit growing for over twenty years. She started her orchard in 1980 with her son Nelson. Over the years she's tried many fruits, always with the idea of finding varieties that will grow and produce well, with a minimum of chemical intervention. Peggy's orchard has been a testing ground for many inventive ideas, old as well as new, from growing red clover as a green manure to her flock of Indian Runner Ducks for keeping bugs at bay. Although she's never been sure about how well the ducks performed in their appointed role as bug-catchers, and their big feet have flattened many a small plant, they have supplied a lot of eggs, and many hours of excellent "Orchard Entertainment."



Of all the fruits Peggy has grown through the years, persimmons have proven to be the sure winners. She has slowly replaced apples, pears and plums with more and more persimmons. Her orchard now has 22 persimmon trees. Because the site is a low area, prone to late spring frosts, the cold hardy astringent varieties of Saijo, Great Wall, Honan Red, and Giombo have proven to be the best choices. Saijo is far and away Peggy's favorite variety, long-lived and highly productive. She has re-grafted less successful varieties with some newer non-astringent varieties, such as Izu, Jiro, and Makawa Jiro.

She starts harvesting in early September, with Saijo and Yamoto. The season ends in November with Honan Red. Harvest-time is filled with old friends and devoted persimmon aficionados who help with the picking and partake of the bounty. Boxes of fruit are mailed off, and friendships are sealed with simple homegrown pleasures.

History and Culture of Oriental Persimmons

As the apple is to America, the persimmon is to Asian countries. Worldwide there are more persimmons sold than apples. The persimmon is slowly catching on here, and is becoming more obtainable in fruit markets and grocery stores.

Introduced into America in the mid 1800's, the first few shipments of plants and seeds failed because they were planted too far north. It was soon realized that persimmons could only thrive in the lower South (we're blessed again!). Easy to grow and renowned for a lack of pest and disease problems, persimmons are an organic gardeners dream. Be sure to choose a quality container-grown tree. Persimmons dislike being transplanted, and bare-root trees are very difficult to establish.

Persimmons need a sunny, well-drained location. Fertilize young trees twice a year during the growing season, in February and July, with a balanced fertilizer. Persimmons usually begin bearing at two or three years. Beginning in the third year, fertilize only once in early spring. Use a low nitrogen mix to avoid fruit drop.

Persimmons are small trees, ranging from fifteen to thirty feet, with large, glossy leaves. They are deciduous, and many varieties provide spectacular fall color. The unbeatable combination of beauty, bountiful fruit, and low-maintenance makes the persimmon a sure-fire addition to any landscape.

Astringent versus Non-Astringent.

Persimmons are divided into two groups, astringent and non-astringent. The astringent varieties can only be eaten when fully ripened to the soft, jelly-like stage. When unripe, they contain tannins that leave an unpleasant, dry, puckered feeling in the mouth. The intense sweetness and

rich texture of astringent persimmons lend themselves nicely to puddings, breads, and mixed-fruit smoothies. They make exquisite dried fruit-leather. Conversely, non-astringents can be eaten in both the firm and soft stages. They rival cantaloupe in both flavor and texture, and are an excellent addition to fruit salads, complimenting tangier flavors such as tangerine, pineapple, and grape.

Some of the best varieties for our area are as follows. Astringent: Saijo, Sheng, Honan Red, Great Wall, Lindy's Giant. Non-astringent: Fuyu, Hana Fuyu, Makawa Jiro, Matsamoto Fuyu.

For more information about growing persimmons, visit the UF-IFAS Extension Web page, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG242>. For more information about other garden topics, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

**Brandy Cowley-Gilbert is owner of Just Fruits and Exotics Nursery in Medart and member of the UF-IFAS Leon County Extension Advisory Committee. Photos by Just Fruits and Exotics Nursery: Lindy's Giant persimmon, and Peggy Martin in persimmon grove.*

[\[Back\]](#)