

Persimmon 柿 (shi)

Elizabeth Cha Smith (11/22/2017)



Persimmon in Our Garden

You may have noticed that we only have one persimmon tree in our Garden and that it is currently heavy with fruit (I counted as many as 50). You may have wondered how a single tree without a partner can produce so many persimmons? This happens because our persimmon tree is parthenocarpic (from the Greek for “virgin fruit”), which means the ovaries of the persimmon flowers develop into seedless fruits without fertilization (like figs and bananas). Our species of persimmon tree is the product of many generations of human hybridization and is not found in any natural habitat.

It also is interesting to know China’s southern provinces of Fujian and Yunnan produce the greatest tonnage of persimmons in the world. Various sources report China produces between 2-4 million metric tonnes per year (compared to less than 450,000 tonnes produced annually by Korea, Japan, and Spain). China’s lead role in modern persimmon production makes sense if you know that persimmons are one of the ancient fruit trees in China where they have the longest history of cultivation along with other indigenous fruits like peach, pear, plum, and apricots.

Chinese Cultural Connection and Symbolism

Unlike most Americans who undervalue and under-harvest persimmons, Chinese people love persimmons just as Japanese and Koreans do! For many Asians, persimmons are the signature fruit when it comes to the fall season. They are eaten fresh and are dried for winter consumption, and they are featured in persimmon celebrations that attract many visitors like the Gongcheng Yueshi (moon persimmon) Festival and the Mancheng Mopanshi Festival in Hebei province. The fruit’s delicious, glossy smooth, reddish color can make families feel especially festive and joyous and its roundness symbolizes reunion of the extended family and represents everything families wish to have for their continued health, wealth and longevity.

I learned from scholars, Z. Luo and R. Wang (“Persimmon in China: Domestication and Traditional Utilizations of Genetic Resources”) that large scale persimmon cultivation began during the Tang (618-07) and Song (960-1279) Dynasties and were frequently included in classical Chinese poetry, songs, poetic essays, arts, and legendary stories. There is an even earlier account of persimmons being planted in the royal gardens during the Warring Dynasty (206 BC- 23 AD) when they were regarded as a “fantastic fruit enjoyed by the few” (Luo and Wang).

According to “Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art” (Terese Tse Bartholomew), the symbolism of the word for “persimmon” comes from a type of Chinese punning based on similar sounds and tones of words that are not otherwise related to to each other (such as a bat symbolizing a blessing because the word

for bat, *fu* 蝠, and blessing, *fu* 祝 are homophones). The character for ‘persimmon’ in Chinese, *shi* 柿, is a homophone with the characters for the words, ‘things’ (*shi* 事), ‘market’ (*shi* 市), and ‘thoughts’ (*shi* 思). The translation of all four words together is something like, may “many 100 things be as you wish them to be!” So persimmon is not only a good fruit, but also carries a hidden meaning of good fortune that will bless any and all households.

Botanical

In our Garden, we have the *Diospyros kaki* ‘Hachiya’ Thun species of persimmon. This ‘hachiya’ type of persimmon is acorn shaped (left picture below) and is the astringent type that is edible when very soft and fully ripe. The second type of persimmon is the more squarish ‘fuyu’ (see right below), which is the non-astringent fruit that is ripe and eaten when it is hard and crisp like an apple.



Family: Ebenaceae. Found in tropical and temperate regions, persimmon is one of 700 or more species of trees and shrubs in the ebony family (without the valuable wood produced by ebony trees).

Genus: Diospyros. “Diospyros” comes from Greek and Latin with varying translations and consists of 500-700 species of trees and shrubs which includes persimmons.

Species: Kaki. “Kaki” is short for the Japanese word for persimmon, kaki-no-ki. “Thun” (in our Garden’s species) refers to Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828), a Swedish botanist who wrote about persimmons in his book *Flora Japan* and introduced persimmons to Europe.

Cultivation, Propagation, Pollination

Although most persimmon trees self-fertilize through parthenocarpy, about 5% have two separate trees, male and female. The young female tree typically take 3 to 5 years to bear fruit.

The small, creamy white persimmon flowers are not showy but they do have a unique calyx (the collective term for the sepals which are modified leaves). The persimmon calyx is found at the bottom of the fruit and is tough and woody. The large calyx encloses and protects the flower buds when they are young and remains strong while the fruit is growing (for aspiration) until we remove them before eating. See the photo below of the persimmon flower surrounded by a thick calyx.



When persimmon fruits have turned to glossy orange and feel soft to the touch after all the leaves have fallen off the tree, you will know they are ripe to pick. Harvest with hand-held pruning shears and leave the calyx intact. Although an unripe persimmon will make your mouth pucker from its tannins, those bitter tasting tannins protect the fruit from being eaten too soon by birds and small animals as well as humans, which could threaten their survival.

Persimmons can be frozen for 6 to 8 months and can be refrigerated for up to a month. When they are peeled whole and dried (see below), they lose their astringency and become a date-like sweet fruit and an excellent source of good vitamins especially during the winter.



Persimmons in America

It was totally delightful to find out that the word “persimmon” is not Greek or Latin but an Algonquian word meaning ‘dry fruit’ from the Chesapeake region in America. When Captain John Smith (1580-1631) wrote about Jamestown and his interactions with Algonquian chief, Powhatan and his daughter Pocahontas, he wrote about persimmons and said of them, “If it be not ripe it will draw a man’s mouth arwie with much torment; but when it is ripe, it is as delicious as an Apricock.”

Although Asian varieties of persimmons could have come to America through a variety of paths, the most recent and officially known source of introduction was through Frans Nicholas Meijer (1875-1918). “Frank Meyer” was a Dutch explorer and plantsman who was hired by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to collect and introduce to America agriculturally useful plants in China including persimmons, Chinese cabbage, soybeans, peaches, Meyer lemon, kiwi, and Chinese chestnuts.

Conclusion

When visitors enter Lan Su Yuan they are happily surprised to see our persimmon tree full of luscious orange fruit hanging at the tips of brittle branches. Visitors don’t expect to see any fruit trees in our Garden this time of year and many have never seen persimmons on a real tree. I have heard some people ask, while looking up at the persimmon fruit, “tomatoes or apples?”

There are many ways one can enliven desserts and salads with persimmons: place a scoop of super-ripened persimmon over your favorite ice cream or toss sliced persimmon into your mixed green salads -- all will be nutritious and delicious and all of your wishes may come true, too!

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