

# NATIVE WILD FOODS:

by Dick Deuerling, as told to Peggy Lantz

## Persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana L.*

“ ‘Possum in a ‘simmon tree. . .”

Persimmons are so good, in the Uncle Remus tale by Joel Chandler Harris, that the ‘possum couldn’t stop eating until too late — Br’er B’ar caught him by the tail, stripping all the hair off, which is why Br’er ‘Possum and all his chillun to this day have a naked tail.

Persimmons *are* good, but only when dead ripe, orange in color, and soft and mushy to the touch. Otherwise, they’ll really pucker your mouth! They ripen in late summer to late fall and, contrary to rumor, do not need frost to sweeten.

Persimmon trees are common in Florida, growing in dry fields, pinelands, and moist woods, but Dick Deuerling says the best persimmons he knows of grow in the Arbuckle Mountains of south central Oklahoma.

The small (½ " to 1½ ") fruits can be picked when they’re yellow and will finish ripening off the tree, but they will not get as sweet as when tree-ripened. The trees in Oklahoma bear so many fruits that Dick says he shoves a limb in a paper bag and shakes it to collect the fruit. He says they don’t bear that heavily in Florida, but shaking the tree to make them drop is still the accepted way to collect persimmons.

If some of the crop has already dropped to the ground, be careful when collecting, for the yellow jackets and bees are apt to be eating on them, too.

When you’ve taken your wild crop home, wash the fruit gently and slip off the cap and stem. Run them through a colander or strainer to squeeze out the pulp. Use the pulp as a topping for ice cream, or make persimmon ice cream.

To make persimmon pancakes, mix a cup of persimmon pulp, 1 egg, 1 cup of flour, a teaspoon of soda and a teaspoon of baking powder, and enough milk to make a thin batter. Cook ‘em like any other pancakes. M-m-m, good!

Persimmon nut bread can be made using the same recipe as banana bread, substituting persimmon pulp for the banana pulp. Dick thinks black walnuts are tastier in this recipe than other nuts, and he says to cook it just a little longer than banana bread.

You haven’t thrown away the seeds and skins left in your colander, have you? Rinse the seeds off, roast them in the oven at low temperature for a couple of hours, and grind them for a coffee substitute.

Put the skins in the blender, whirl them around a while, and run them out onto a cookie sheet to about ¼ "

*Remember, in all of your foraging, to avoid collecting wild foods near roadways where heavy metals and other pollutants from automobile exhaust settles on plants, or any place where insecticides or herbicides are used.*

to ½ " thick. Bake it slowly in the oven at a low temperature until nearly dry to make “fruit leather”.

If you bring home a big crop and haven’t time to process them all, you can freeze them whole and work them up later. Or take off the cap, flatten them on a cookie sheet with your hand, and dry them in the sun. When dry, tear them up to remove the seeds, store the fruits and seeds in paper bags (not plastic), and use them as needed.

Not all persimmon trees bear fruit, but even the fruitless ones can provide you with wild tea. Pick mature leaves, and dry them on a tray in the back window of the car (leave the window cracked open for ventilation), or in a gas oven with the pilot light for heat. It takes a couple days to dry them to finger-crispness. The main vein should snap easily when ready. Store them in tight jars in the dark, like any other tea. If they’re not dry enough, they’ll mold. Dick says moldiness will be apparent: they’ll smell and look bad.

And if your favorite persimmon tree, which is in the ebony family, should die or have dead branches, the wood is good for carving.