Friday’s Feature
By
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From the tree to the pie, pecans are great nuts

As a young child in Alabama, I have fond memories of gathering pecans. While I quickly picked-up pecans that had fallen to the ground, my mother would shell a few for me to eat. The rich texture and nutty taste has made pecans my favorite nut.

The history of pecans can be traced back to the 16th century. The only major tree nut that grows naturally in North America, the pecan is considered one of the most valuable North American nut species. The name "pecan" is a Native American word of Algonquin origin that was used to describe “all nuts requiring a stone to crack.”

The climate of the pecan’s native range is characterized by long, hot summers and moderately cool winters. Currently, the United States produces the majority of the world’s pecan crop.

However, pecan trees are not as widespread as they once were, especially in landscapes. This is probably due to several reasons including the fact that the branches of pecan are sometimes brittle, resulting in occasional falling branches, especially during high winds. They are also large trees requiring abundant space. But perhaps the most important limitation to pecan production in the southeastern United States is a fungal disease called pecan scab.

Pecan grove in North Florida
Photo credits: Thomas Wright, UF/IFAS
Pecan scab causes black spots on developing leaves and nutlets and can lead to premature defoliation and complete crop loss. Control of scab is particularly difficult in wet years. In general, 8 to 12 fungicide spray applications are required to control scab on susceptible cultivars. Powerful air blast sprayers are required to obtain spray coverage of trees that can be more than 70 feet tall. This intense spray schedule is almost impossible for the typical gardener.

Of the approximate 200 pecan cultivars that have been named over the last 100+ years, very few are adapted to the southeastern United States. Relatively few have enough pecan scab resistance to be recommended for north Florida.

Highly recommended cultivars include ‘Cape Fear’, ‘Elliott’, and ‘Moreland’. Recommended cultivars include ‘Curtis’ and ‘Sumner’. Conditionally recommended cultivars include ‘Stuart’ and ‘Desirable’.

Newer cultivars that are highly recommended include ‘Lakota’, ‘Excel’, ‘Gafford’ and ‘Headquarters’. Many of the western cultivars, especially those with native American names such as ‘Pawnee’, though they begin bearing at an early age, cannot be recommended due to having less disease resistance in the Southeast.

Trees should be planted during the dormant season (from late November to February) to allow root growth before the spring. Transplant bare-root trees as soon as possible after they are dug in the nursery. A bare-root tree at least 6 feet in height is recommended.
One of the keys to survival of a pecan tree is not allowing the root system to dry out before, during or after transplanting. The planting hole should be 18 to 24 inches wide and only as deep as the root system. Spread the roots out so that they are not matted together, thus allowing for normal growth and development. The planting depth is critical. Place at such a depth that the uppermost root is at, or slightly above, the soil surface. Excessively deep planting of pecan trees can result in death.

For more information on “The Pecan Tree” visit the University of Florida online publication at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HS229 or call your local Extension Office.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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