

PERSIMMONS (*Diospyros virginiana*)

Wild persimmons are a late-ripening fruit, often found hanging on leafless branches into early winter. When properly ripe, a persimmon is so soft that it is like a skin full of jelly; inexperienced foragers may think the fruit spoiled because it is darkened and wrinkled. However, any forager who samples an underripe persimmon will quickly learn to wait until the fruit is jelly-soft; underripe persimmons are extremely astringent and unpleasant

Old-time country lore says the weather can be predicted by looking at the shape inside a split-open persimmon seed. A spoon indicates a snowy winter; if a knife is seen, the winter will be cold and icy, while a fork predicts a mild winter.

to eat, or even to taste. Ripe persimmons, however, have a rich, sweet flavor; in fact, wild persimmons are much more flavorful than the domestic varieties found in supermarkets during fall and winter.

Experienced foragers look for ripe persimmons that have fallen from the tree, hoping to find some that have landed, intact, on a

cushion of leaves. Slightly underripe persimmons may be collected and placed on the countertop until jelly-soft, but the flavor will not be as full as tree-ripened fruits.

Interestingly, underripe persimmons can be dehydrated successfully; the astringency disappears, and the dehydrated fruit is delightfully sweet and chewy. (See pgs. 182–184 for instructions.) If dehydrating underripe persimmons, choose fruits that are orange and just starting to soften. Purée made from ripe persimmons makes an outstanding fruit leather (pg. 184).

When looking for recipes using persimmons, don't be fooled by those calling for sliced persimmons; these were written for Fuyu persimmons, a domesticated, non-astringent variety that can be eaten when still as firm as an apple. Recipes written for Hachiya, another domesticated variety, are a better choice; like wild persimmons, Hachiya are astringent, and must be jelly-soft before eating. (If you see persimmons in the store, the Fuyu are flattened, while Hachiya are acorn-shaped with a soft point at the bottom.)

To prepare wild persimmons, pull off (or cut away) and discard the dried floral remnants (calyx) at the top of each fruit. **For chunky pulp** (which can be mashed or chopped), cut fruits in half and use a teaspoon to scoop the flesh into a mixing bowl, scraping off and then discarding the skins. Pick through the pulp and remove any seeds; most wild persimmons have several flat, brown seeds, but some are seedless. Scrape the pulp off the seeds as best you can; they're very slippery! A dozen average wild persimmons will yield about 1 cup of chunky pulp. **For smooth purée**, cut fruits in half and process them (skins still on) through a food mill or potato ricer; it will separate the skin and seeds, which can be discarded. You should get about 1 cup of purée from each quart of fruit.

Persimmon pulp or purée can be frozen in freezer-safe, airtight containers; it may darken when thawed, but the flavor will still be fine. You can also can the pulp or purée in a water-bath canner; process half-pints for 30 minutes (see pg. 185 for information about canning). Some people like to freeze whole persimmons, and eat the frozen fruit right out of the skin; the frozen flesh is somewhat like sherbet.

Persimmon Frozen Yogurt

About 1½ pints

Pale orange, creamy and delicious, this has a tangy sweetness that is very refreshing.

1⅓ cups plain yogurt, regular or reduced-fat (not fat-free)

¾ cup smooth persimmon purée

1 tablespoon light corn syrup

1 tablespoon freshly squeezed orange juice

½ cup sugar

⅓ cup whole milk

1 teaspoon unflavored gelatin

Prepare ice cream freezer as directed by manufacturer. In medium mixing bowl, stir together the yogurt, persimmon purée, corn syrup and orange juice; cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until needed. In small saucepan, combine sugar and milk. Heat over low heat, stirring constantly, until sugar dissolves and mixture no longer looks grainy, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove from heat; set aside until just warm, about 5 minutes.

When the milk mixture has cooled to warm (about like a baby's bottle), sprinkle gelatin over the top; let stand for about a minute, then stir continuously for a minute longer. Pour mixture into bowl with persimmon, and stir all together very well. Re-cover and refrigerate for at least an hour, and as long as 2 hours.

When mixture has chilled for 1 to 2 hours, transfer to prepared ice-cream maker and churn until mixture holds a soft shape, generally 15 to 20 minutes. Scoop into plastic container, cover tightly and freeze for at least 2 hours before serving. The frozen yogurt will keep in the freezer for a week or so; if it becomes too hard to scoop, place container in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes to soften the frozen yogurt slightly before serving.

Variation: Add ½ cup toffee bits (found in the baking aisle with the chocolate chips) to the mixture during the last 5 minutes of churning. The toffee is a nice complement to the persimmon flavor, and the texture is a pleasant addition.