"In Natures Garden"

The Persimmon

By ELIZABETH MURRAY

I always receive a certain number of letters about the column which I write for Virginia Wildlife, occasional compliments, occasional criticisms, some requests for information and a great many letters which supply me with information I did not already have, or tell me stories I did not already know. But by far the largest amount of all this correspondence has been about persimmons which I mentioned in a general article on wild cooking a few years ago. I am constantly being asked for my recipe for persimmon bread, and so it seems worthwhile at this time of year to devote some more attention to these much-maligned fruits and what you can do with them.

Our persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana*, is the only member of the ebony family (Ebenaceae) in our eastern U. S. flora. It is a tree with very hard, blackish wood, somewhat like ebony, and alternate, shiny green, simple leaves. Persimmon trees are largely dioecious, that is male (staminate) and female (pistillate) flowers are on different trees, or at least if the pistillate flowers do have stamens, they are non-functional. Pistillate flowers have a greenish-cream, urn-shaped corolla about half an inch long. There are 4 styles and, when present, 8 sterile stamens. The flowers are usually solitary with short stalks. Male flowers are generally grouped in twos or threes, they also have urn-like corollas, but they are smaller than the female flowers, and have 16 fertile stamens. The fruit, occurring, of course, only on the female trees, is known technically as a "several-locular berry." Persimmon trees may get to be quite big. The one which holds the state record is 79 feet high with a circumference near the base of 7½ feet. Typically, however, they are much smaller. I pick most of my persimmons off a tree that is barely 20 feet high, and it was smaller than this when it first started bearing fruit.

Persimmon trees like dry woods, abandoned fields and clearings. One often sees a little grove of them standing alone in the middle of an old pasture. The trees flower in early summer and the fruit is set--but by no means ready--by late summer.

Not every female persimmon tree has good fruit, and trees seem to be set in their 'fruit-producing ways' from 'birth'. We have two trees which always produce dried-up useless persimmons, whereas the small tree I mentioned above consistently has good, juicy fruit regardless of the weather. So, if you are in the persimmon business, it is a wise plan to remember the good trees and return to them year after year.

Persimmons should be picked sometime in the early winter. Country lore says "after the first frost." Actually, if you wait for this in Virginia, the persimmons may have already fallen off and spoiled on the ground. And, contrary to popular belief, the first frost does not necessarily take the "pucker" out of the fruit. I pick persimmons when they feel very soft and squashy, when their pretty orange ripe-looking color has dimmed to a dull, dirty overripe-looking purple--and just before they drop off the tree. In other words, if fruit has started to drop off my tree, then I'll go out at once and pick the persimmons which remain!

The persimmons should be washed and put through a food mill to get the pulp out and leave the seeds. It does not matter if the "pucker" is still in the pulp. Once the pulp is baked into the bread, the "pucker" disappears. This is the greatest discovery I have made since emigrating to this country and I made it all by myself--nobody told me! The pulp can be frozen until you are ready to use it. Extra loaves of bread can be frozen after baking until required. I always try to keep a few loaves in the freezer for unexpected guests. The bread is universally popular. I take it to school picnics, sell it at school carnivals, serve it to foreign visitors to show off our local produce, give it to neighbors for Christmas and bake it in quantity for family and friends at my own home.

Now for the recipe. It is very easy. A cup of sugar is creamed together with six ounces of margarine, two eggs are beaten in, and then two cups of flour and one teaspoonful of baking soda added. Finally at least one cup of persimmon pulp is stirred in (more is acceptable) and nuts and/or raisins added if you like--we prefer it without. The mixture is spread into two one-pound loaf pans lined with wax paper and baked for one hour at 325°. The pulp darkens on heating so the result is deep brown loaves from which the wax paper can be peeled while they are still quite warm. When cold, thin slices can be cut from the loaves and spread with butter. The recipe can be doubled quite satisfactorily.

This bread is the only 'persimmon food' which I make routinely in my own household, and I can offer this recipe as being thoroughly well-tried and much appreciated. But there are other ways in which persimmons can be used in cooking. I have been in intermittent correspondence for some years with Mr. Arthur Stewart in California, who is an exile from *Diospyros virginiana*, which is not allowed to be "imported" into California. They have great big pulpy

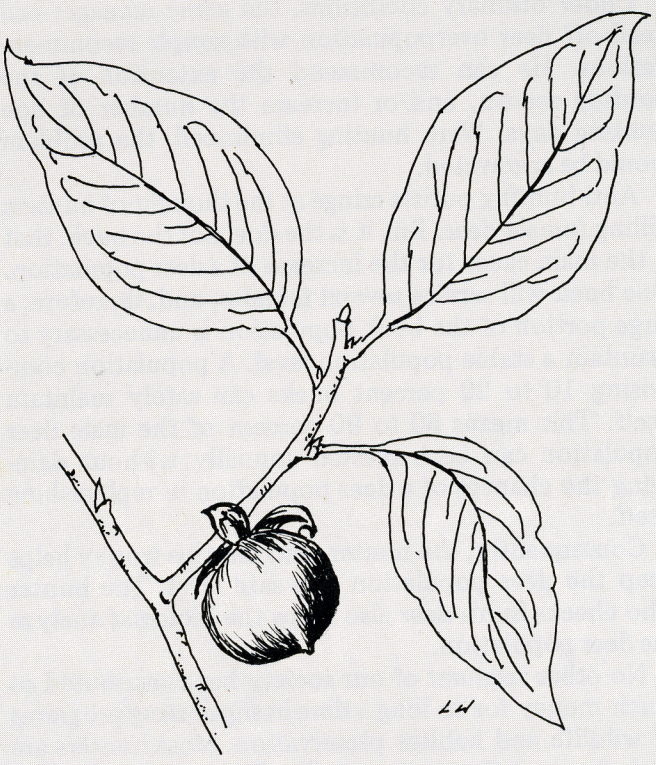

Illustration by Lucile Walton

persimmons in California which occasionally find their way to our grocery stores, and which, in my chauvinism, I find a poor second to our local ones. Mr. Stewart has showered me with recipes for persimmon pudding (a dish more traditionally cooked in the Carolinas than in Virginia), telling me that I could surely work out my own formula from amongst them. I did, and offer it here in its simplest form. Two ounces of margarine were creamed together with a cup of sugar and then two egg yolks, a half a cup of milk and a cup of persimmon pulp beaten in. To this, a cup of plain flour, sifted with half a teaspoon of baking soda, was added. Finally the two egg whites, stiffly beaten, were folded gently in. The batter was poured into a well-greased casserole, baked in a water bath for one hour at 325°, and served hot, with cream. There are many embellishments and variations for the pudding, all of which sound palatable. Nuts, raisins or dates can be added. Some recipes suggest combining sweet potato and persimmon pulp, and some advocate the use of sour milk. The pudding can be steamed instead of baked. I think Mr. Stewart's advice to me applies to everyone. Anybody seriously interested in persimmon pudding can work out their own optimal recipe from these suggestions.

Dios means 'divine', sometimes used for Jupiter himself, and *puros* or *pyros* means 'wheat' or 'grain'. So, translated somewhat loosely, the generic name for the persimmon could mean "food of the gods" which some of the most ardent admirers of the fruit believe it to be.