

## GROWING PECANS IN THE HOME GARDEN

Yakima Valley and Columbia Basin

By Jack Hampton, Benton County Master Gardener

Yes, you can grow very good pecans in our region. Most pecan trees are sufficiently hardy, but some varieties aren't suitable. This arises from the fact that there are two races of pecans; namely, short season and long season. Pecans were originally found growing from Texas north to Iowa, Illinois and Nebraska in the Mississippi drainage. Since the length of growing season equates with pecan size, the largest cultivars are of southern origin.

For our region we want trees from Missouri, Iowa, or Illinois. This means that some size will have to be sacrificed. A nut that will ripen here, just barely beating the cold weather, is ideal. We'll leave the shortest season, and hence the smallest cultivars, for friends to the north.

### **Pecan Pollination**

It's important to understand pecan pollination. Pecans exhibit a trait called "dichogamy." This means that they try to avoid self-pollination. To do this they have separate male and female flowers that mature at different times. To achieve pollination there are two types of blooming trees. The male (staminate) flowers of the protandrous type mature before the female flowers. The female (pistillate) flowers of the protogynous type mature before the male flowers. Obviously, both types of trees are needed to assure good nut production. Nature uses this scheme because trees grown from cross-pollinated seed are stronger and more vigorous.

### **Varieties**

Don't buy the so-called Northern Seedling pecans, unless you plan to graft them. These trees often fail to ripen their nuts and the nuts will be small.

Plant the protogynous variety Colby (Illinois ancestry), and pair it with either Stark (James) Hardy Giant (Missouri ancestry) or Perouque.

Don't plant Oklahoma or Texas cultivars. Their nuts will not ripen and will be blanks (hollow shells).

### **Culture**

Pollen is spread by the wind, so don't situate the trees too far apart. The best plan is to plant a Colby and then graft other varieties on to it. The author has one tree with three grafted pecan cultivars and also three grafted hickory cultivars.

Pecan trees need and like a lot of water. Fertilize your pecans with ammonium sulfate. Don't use fertilizers with high amounts of phosphorous. It ties up the available zinc in the soil. Too much phosphorous in the soil can lead to zinc deficiency which will cause the leaf edges to crinkle. Zinc deficiency in pecans can be helped by foliar sprays of zinc chelates or by soil applications of zinc sulfate.

We don't have many pests that attack pecans, since we have no native populations of pecan trees.

### **Harvesting**

Expect to wait eight or ten years or more for production of nuts. Wildlife such as crows and squirrels love pecans. You can beat them to the nuts by picking as soon as the shucks begin to split. Squeeze the shuck with the fingers, and if it splits the nut is ripe. This will usually start to occur about the first of October. There will always be some nuts that will not ripen. On these nuts the shuck will not split or it will adhere tightly.

### **Local Pecan Trees**

There is a beautiful pecan tree at the east end of Howard Amon Park in Richland. It bears a few small, almost round pecans that are used by man and wildlife. A huge pecan tree may be seen across the street from the old Sears Parking lot in Pasco. It bears small elongated nuts, and you can pick up some in the nearby alley next to a car wash. This tree has my vote for the most outstanding tree in the Tri-Cities.