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As fall rolls around people start seeing pecans and walnuts for sale at markets, so the desire to plant a tree and produce your own nuts at home sounds like a good idea. As a general rule, I tell home gardeners to consider a pecan tree a good shade tree, and if you get quality nuts, without diseases or that the squirrels have not harvested, that is a bonus.

Many gardeners don't realize how large a pecan tree is at maturity. These trees can grow to be 75 feet tall with a 40 foot spread, and you need two different varieties for cross-pollination. Most pecan trees also need a spray program to keep the nuts disease and insect free, but how many home gardeners have the ability to spray a tree that large? You also need to be aware that they won't begin to bear fruit for 7-10 years.

Knowing all this information, and still wanting pecan trees for your yard, here is the additional information you need to know. When planting a pecan tree, choose the planting site carefully. Due to the large mature size of a pecan tree, plant them at least 20 feet away from your home or driveway and 40 feet away from other trees to allow for good air flow, sunlight and competition. Pecan trees need full sun and a well-drained soil. Pecan trees cannot tolerate heavy clay soils, or extremely rocky sites.

As previously mentioned you need two different varieties for cross-pollination, but not just any two. If your neighbors have pecan trees, find out what variety they have, since if a tree is within a quarter of a mile of where you are planting, it can aid in pollinations if they are in bloom at the same time. There are basically two types of pecan trees. The first type has male blooms that are done with shedding their pollen before the female trees on that tree are receptive. The second type has female blooms needing pollen before the male flowers are ready to release their pollen. For pollination to occur you need to have both types of trees. You also want to consider disease resistance. The most devastating disease on pecans is scab. This disease attacks both the leaves and the nuts, and in a bad year can destroy the entire crop. To reduce the number of sprays needed for control, it is best to choose a variety that is resistant to it.

Here is a table copied from our fact sheet on recommended varieties of pecans for Arkansas:

| Recommended Pecan Varieties for Arkansas Variety | Nut Size | Nut Quality | Nut Ripening | Potential Crop Size | Scab      |             |
|--|----------|-------------|--------------|---------------------|-----------|-------------|
|  |          |             |              |                     |           | Pollen Type |
| Caddo  | Medium   | Very Good   | Early        | Moderate            | Good      | I           |
| Amling   | Medium   | Very Good   | Middle       | Moderate to Low     | Very Good | I           |
| Elliot   | Small    | Good        | Middle       | Large               | Very Good | II          |
| Kanza  | Small    | Very Good   | Early        | Moderate            | Very Good | II          |

|        |            |           |        |          |              |    |
|--------|------------|-----------|--------|----------|--------------|----|
| Lakota | Large      | Good      | Middle | Moderate | Very Good    | II |
| Pawnee | Large      | Very Good | Middle | Large    | Good to Fair | I  |
| Oconee | Very Large | Very Good | Late   | Large    | Good         | I  |
| Stuart | Large      | Fair      | Late   | Moderate | Fair         | II |

Once you have chosen your varieties, get the site prepared. Take a soil sample in to your local county extension office. This can determine your soil pH and nutrient levels. If you can find the varieties you want, fall planting is ideal. Be prepared to water even during the winter if it gets dry, but fall planted trees get down to business putting on roots while the tops are dormant. Don't add any fertilizer at planting time, but fertilize in late February to March and then again in June to early July, but do pay attention to water needs. Young trees need regular watering, but they can't tolerate wet feet. Mulch around the base of your trees to keep weed and grass competition down and to prevent damage from weed-eaters. Fertilization schedules stay the same with older trees; you simply need to increase the rate of application.

As with any tree, proper training and pruning is the most important in the first 4-6 years of the trees life. This is when you are producing the structure and shape of the tree. Most pecan trees grow slowly the first year—they are busy getting established, and not as concerned about top growth. Make sure the tree you purchase has just one straight trunk with no major forks along the trunk. In year two, you can begin to remove low side limbs and look for sharp angles or weak limbs. The sooner you correct a problem, the less of a problem that problem is. Many folks think they will wait several years to allow the tree to grow before pruning, and then minor issues can become major. Continue encouraging a strong trunk with strong branches and crotch angles for the next few years.

Once your trees come of age and begin to bear fruit, monitor for insects and diseases. When harvest season rolls around, the nuts are ready to be harvested when the nuts start to separate from the husks. You can knock the nuts from the tree with a rigid cane or PVC pole or allow the nuts to fall naturally and pick them up from the ground. Placing a tarp under the tree helps with both methods. It is important to pick them quickly once they fall as they can be damaged by wet weather or picked up by any number of animals.

You can eat them immediately or store them. Make sure they are dry before storing, and for long term storage, the best place to store them is in the freezer.

There are other nut crops that can be grown. We are beginning to see some disease resistant chestnut trees becoming available and productive. Black walnut trees are large trees and produce very large seed pods, but can be messy and the root system can impede growth of some landscape plants. While some gardeners have limited success with other nut crops, we rarely can produce any almonds or hazelnuts.