

# FROM TREE TO TABLE

Eating a piece of grandma's delicious pecan pie doesn't take very long, but growing the pecans that are in the pie took a very long time! Let's spend a few minutes learning how pecans make the journey from the orchard, to your dessert table.

## The Orchard

When a pecan grower decides to grow pecan trees, he or she needs to have patience and be willing to make a long-term commitment. The first step is to determine where to plant the orchard. While pecan trees can grow in many places in the United States, the best area to grow them is in the Southeast. The top three pecan producing states are Georgia, Texas and Alabama. North Carolina is usually in the top ten pecan-producing states, and is on the northern edge of the commercial pecan-producing region in the US. Pecans like a hot and humid climate, lots of water, and deep, well-drained, sandy-loam soil. Because of the specialized climate necessary, most pecan trees in North Carolina are grown in the coastal plain.

## Planting the Trees

The best month for planting new pecan trees is January. But, before trees are planted, the orchard owner needs to choose which varieties of pecans he or she wants to plant. In order for the pecan nuts to be properly pollinated, at least three different varieties should be planted. Though they are only about five to seven feet tall when planted, pecan trees get very big over time, so they need to be spaced about 70 feet apart. About 6-9 trees are planted on one acre. Each year the tree will grow about 10 to 12 inches, and pecans will only develop on the new growth, so it's important to make sure that the trees are well cared for each and every year.

## Wait, wait, wait...

It takes several years before pecan trees start producing pecans. Most new and improved varieties begin to produce pecans within five to six years, but older, traditional varieties take longer. During this waiting time the orchard owner isn't just sitting around, there are a lot of tasks to be accomplished. Pecan trees will need to be watered very frequently, especially during the first year. They will also need to be pruned, fertilized and monitored to make sure that insects and animals aren't damaging them. There are four main insects that hurt pecan trees. They are: pecan weevils, twig girdlers, stink bugs, and aphids. In addition, deer, squirrels, crows and blue jays can also "steal" the pecans and harm the trees.

## The Growing Season

Once a pecan tree is mature, it will go through different stages throughout the year. The growth stages are:

The Dormant Stage: Pecan trees are dormant during the winter months. This is kind of like a rest period for the tree.

During dormancy, the tree doesn't appear to be growing, but many important things are happening. In order for pecan trees to produce pecans during the next year they need at least 200 chill hours during this period. (A chill hour is an hour where the temperature is between 32°F and 45°F.)

Bud-break/Pollination: During late April and early May, pecan trees pollinate. Pecan trees are monoecious, which means they have separate male structures (catkins,) and female flowers (pistillates). The catkins are long, golden tassels and produce pollen. The female flowers receive the pollen and nut growth begins. During this time, the pecan grower spends a lot of time making sure the trees are free of problems with insects and diseases.

Nutlet Stage: The young pecans continue to grow in June and July and are called nutlets.

Nut-Fill Stage: Pecans mature during the nut-fill stage in September and early October. Some varieties of pecan trees produce many small clusters of pecans, and others produce fewer large clusters.

Shuck-Split Stage: After a 200-day growing period, the pecan shuck opens, allowing the nut to drop.

## Harvesting

Pecan growers are very busy during harvesting time. The size of a pecan orchard will determine how an individual grower will harvest his or her pecans. Commercial growers with large orchards have special machines that shake, pick up, and process the pecans to prepare them for customers. Smaller orchards usually just pick the pecans up by hand.

## What's Next?

Once the pecans are harvested, the grower is ready to sell them. Some growers sell their pecans to grocery stores, some sell their pecans to food companies who will use them in recipes, and some sell them at the Farmer's Market and roadside stands. Customers buy pecans from those places, take them home, and eat them all kinds of great ways! While people eat the most pecans during the holiday season, they are available all year long and are a super snack. In fact, many doctors and scientists are learning that eating more pecans can help people stay healthy too. So the next time you eat pecans, whether it's in Grandma's delicious pecan pie, or a quick handful as a snack, remember that what you eat in two minutes took years and years to make it from the tree to your table.