

November: The Pecan

The Louisiana Pecan Festival

The crowning of the Festival Queen is the highlight of the Louisiana Pecan Festival, which takes place over a long weekend at the beginning of November, in Colfax, a small town located in northern half of Louisiana, in the southern USA.

Begun in 1969, the Festival, which takes place after the annual pecan harvest, now attracts some 70,000 people from far and wide each year and comprises many different events and competitions, plus displays, trade-stands and musical entertainment.

A 'blessing of the crops' on the first day begins proceedings, which will also include a grand parade, fireworks, pie-eating contests for adults and children and cooking events designed to show the diversity of pecans themselves as well as their varied culinary uses. The "Best Pecan Pie" is one of the most coveted awards.

Sacks of pecans grown in the region abound and visitors are encouraged to sample the many varieties of these smooth-shelled, torpedo-shaped nuts, which have surprisingly different textures and tastes.

Pecan jams, pecan jellies, pecan ice-cream, pecan candy, pecan beer – the great versatility of the pecan is on display. There are pecans in just about everything you can think of and of course, there's the world-famous pecan pie - pecan growing is a way of life here.

The sweet pecan, Illinois nut, faux hickory and pecan hickory are all names for the pecan – North America's most important native nut tree. Thriving in a warm, humid climate it is most at home in the lower Mississippi Valley, but is distributed across many parts of the USA, as far north as southern Ohio and as far south as southern Mexico. In 1919 the pecan was declared the state tree of Texas.

A member of the *Juglandaceae* family – to which hickory, walnut and butternut trees also belong - the pecan is a stately, long-lived tree. With a flakey grey bark which turns brownish red with age, the tree is wind-pollinated, producing male flowers in the form of catkins, whilst female flowers are borne on spikes. Maturing slowly and growing up to 50m high, the pecan's spreading branches and broad leaves make it an important shade provider.

Dozens of varieties - developed to suit a variety of growing conditions, to resist disease and produce large yields of nuts – are now grown in orchards in some 20 states across the USA. Playing a hugely important role in the economy of the Southern states, it is calculated that pecan production in Louisiana alone, adds around \$12 million to the economy each year.

Pecan trees don't come true from seed: this means that when a pecan nut (the seed) is planted, it won't produce nuts that are the same as those borne by its parent tree. For this reason, though nuts are also harvested from wild trees - sought after by growers because of the variation in the nuts' taste and texture - most growers graft bud wood taken from their desired pecan onto their homegrown rootstock.

A mature pecan tree can yield about 100 lbs of nuts in a season. The USA's 2014 crop is estimated to be in the region of 275,625,000 pounds (in shell), representing some 80 -95% of the world's supply, from more than 10 million trees.

Pecans are also grown commercially in Australia, Brazil, China, Israel, Mexico, Peru and South Africa.

NUTRITION

Pecan nuts once formed an important part of the diet of North American Indian peoples. The name 'pecan', referring to the nut, comes from the Algonquin Indian language and means 'needing a stone to crack'.

Many Native Americans gathered wild pecans and combined them with fruits and vegetables (such as beans, corn, and squashes), used ground pecan meal to thicken meat stews, and included roasted pecans as part of their supplies to sustain them on long journeys. A 'pecan milk' drink was also made.

OTHER USES

Growing slowly, pecan trees produce a very hard and heavy wood of great strength and with contrasting grain that is much sought after for furniture making, flooring, and wall paneling.

It is also used for agricultural implements, baseball bats, hammer handles and decorative carving.

Pecan nuts are highly nutritious: 15 pecan halves provide as much protein as one ounce of meat. Containing up to 18 % protein and 70% monounsaturated oil they have a higher antioxidant content than any other nut. Pecans contain plant sterols (known for their cholesterol-lowering ability) and

eating a handful of nuts a day is recommended by some as a means of reducing harmful cholesterol levels in the blood. There is evidence that the daily consumption of pecans may also delay age-related muscle nerve degeneration.

Many chefs and home cooks in the southern USA use pecan wood for smoking and barbecuing. Pecan smoke is considered to produce a smoother, fruitier taste than that produced by other woods. In addition, the cooler burning temperature of pecan wood makes it suitable for the slow cooking of large pieces of meat.

The distinct and deep buttery taste of pecans makes them suitable for use not only in sweet dishes such as the famous pecan pie – a traditional southern US recipe - and as an

ingredient of jams, biscuits and confectionery, including praline candy, but in savoury cooking too.

AUSTRALIA'S PEST-FREE PECANS

Australia is the world's 4th largest pecan producer. Although it contributes only some 2% of the global harvest, planting is increasing as demand continues to outstrip supply.

Australia offers several important advantages for pecan growers: its environment is largely free of the pests that can attack pecans elsewhere and most crops are grown without the use of chemical

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pesticides. In addition, its cropping season occurs from April to June, so doesn't conflict with the mid October/November harvest in the Southern states of the USA.

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