

Backyard Pecans – A Southern Favorite

Pecans are a southern tradition for sure. It doesn't really matter how you pronounce pecan, but growing them is a point of pride for us in the South, not to mention homemade pecan pies. When pecan trees don't reward us with a large healthy crop of nuts, I get plenty of calls. Unfortunately I don't have a quick, magical solution.

We're kind of spoiled when it comes to homegrown pecans. Most of the time or at least the way we remember, a mature tree bears a pretty good crop of nuts annually with very little help from us. However, we usually forget about the years that turn out to be a complete failure.

Actually, we fail to realize how many potential problems are out there that can cause a poor pecan year. We have to realize that the same insect and diseases that are facing commercial growers also face the home or backyard orchard. In general, we can't spray home orchards with pesticides in the same manner the commercial growers do. And, we can't expect the varieties that work so well for commercial orchards to perform the same in our back yard. All pecan trees are not alike.

Variety selection is the backbone of any backyard orchard. The home orchard should be considered low impact and so disease resistance should be the number one priority. Our Georgia climate is ideal for pecan scab, the number one problem facing pecan production. Pecan scab can take out an entire crop especially if we get wet summer weather. There are no control options to fight scab other than planting a variety with high disease resistance. If you're planning to set out some new trees, consider varieties such as Excel, Elliott, Summer, Gloria Grande, Gafford, Jenkins and Amling according to University of Georgia Pecan Specialist, Lenny Wells.

Wells also reminds us that pecans can be expected to bear a heavy crop every other year. When bearing a light crop, pecan trees store excess nutrients until the following year. Well managed trees can go several years without fertilizer before there is a reduction in yield or tree health. For this reason, trees that have been neglected for many years may take several years of proper fertilizing to begin normal production again.

For the backyard pecan tree, apply 4 pounds of 10-10-10 for every inch of trunk diameter up to a maximum of 25 pounds. When a light crop is expected, this rate can be cut in half. Apply the fertilizer beneath the tips of the branches. Avoid putting fertilizer near the base of the trunk and do not pour fertilizer into holes dug or bored under the tree.

The best advice for other insect and disease problems for home gardeners is to keep the orchard floor clean. Remove leaves, twigs and nuts and keep the grass mowed.

For pecan weevils, we can use Sevin spray on the ground and at the base of the trunk in late summer to get some control.

Hopefully, 2008 will be a good one for southern pecans and plenty of pecan pies.