Pecan Trees a Symbol of the South

From the graceful sway of the leaves and branches in the spring to the melt-in-your-mouth taste of pecan pie at Thanksgiving, pecan trees are a true symbol of the South. With Thanksgiving only a few weeks away, pecans are falling all over the county.

Many people have pecan trees that have been on their property for years and years. I often get calls this time of year asking for help to encourage production of these fully mature trees. Before adding fertilizer and using pesticides, there are a few things that most people should know about their trees.

Pecan trees are categorized as either a Type 1 pecan, or a Type 2 pecan tree. While pecan trees do have both male and female flowers on the same tree, the male and female flowers are not open at the same time. This causes pollination problems, which will mean a small crop of pecans. Research has shown that ideal production happens when you have at least three varieties of pecan trees with at least one Type 1 and one Type 2 tree. This situation is the best because the female flowers of the Type 1 pecan trees are open at the same time that the male flowers of the Type 2 trees are open. Without a tree from each category, one cannot expect prime pecan production each year.

Many of the traditional pecan varieties are considered to be alternate or cyclic producers. This means that the trees will produce well one year and then not the next. This can be a two- or a three-year cycle. One of the most popular varieties planted around older homesteads, Stuart, is considered an alternate producer.

Many older homes may only have a single tree, or they may only have one variety of pecan. So, what can you do to increase the production in your home landscape? The best place to start your plan of attack is with a soil sample. The North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services will test your soil for free, if you live in North Carolina. Stop by your local North Carolina Cooperative Extension office for soil boxes and the paperwork. In Robeson County, the Extension office, located at 455 Caton Road, will even hand deliver your samples to the lab in Raleigh. The sample results will tell you how much fertilizer and lime to add to the soil around your trees. The results will also tell you if you have a zinc deficiency. Zinc is vital in pecan production and is an additive in many pecan fertilizers, but should only be added if a deficiency is detected.
While you are waiting for your soil sample results, the best thing for homeowners to do is get out there and pick up pecans. Keeping the underside of the tree free of pecans, leaves, and debris is one of the best ways to help prevent disease and insect problems. Two of the most common problems with pecans, scab and pecan weevils, overwinter in the soil and can return the following year. Scab is a fungal problem that overwinters in debris and leaves under the tree and then re-infects the tree the following year by rain and wind carrying the spores back into the tree. Scab causes the back spots you see on the leaves, shucks, and pecans. At this time of year, pecan weevils are in their larval stage inside the actual nut. When the nuts fall, the larvae exit the pecan and burrow into the ground to overwinter until next August or September when they will come up out of the soil and start the process over again. Removing the pecans as soon as they hit the ground can interrupt this insect cycle and significantly reduce the problem over time.

Pecan trees can be one of the most rewarding trees to have in a home landscape, providing shade, beauty, and sustenance. The simple steps discussed above can increase production and decrease your frustrations, but there is one thing I cannot help you with … cracking. While this Yankee is not a pecan cracker, I can point you in the right direction. So if you are looking for someone to crack, shell, sell or even shake your trees, feel free to contact me.

If you have any question, comments, or ideas please contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at 910-671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.