Pecans

The pecan tree is a true symbol of southeast North Carolina. Not too long ago, pecans were grown as part of a means of survival. Today, many enjoy the extra income and aesthetic quality they bring to a property. Pecans are a long-term commitment, with many people planting in hopes their children will one-day benefit. Others have inherited orchards that are half a century old, and are only now trying to figure out how to care for the trees. No matter if you are starting your own from saplings, or have inherited trees that are over 60 feet tall, growing pecans can be an enjoyable and profitable experience if you keep in mind a few vital characteristics of the trees.

Pecans are monoecious, meaning they have separate male and female flower structures on the same plant. This makes for an interesting situation, because the time at which the male structures release pollen is not a time when the female structure is accepting pollen. Pecan trees are split into two groups, Type I and Type II (Type I – Cape Fear & Pawnee / Type II – Stuart, Sumner, Forkert, Elliott, Kiowa, Gloria, Chickasaw, and Grande). A type I variety is releasing pollen when a type II is accepting, and a type II is releasing pollen when a type I is accepting. Because of this, it is recommended that you plant at least three varieties of pecan trees with at least one of each type. Desirable, Mahan, Schley, and Success varieties are not recommended for North Carolina because of their lack of cold tolerance, short growing season, or pest problems.

Pecans are trashy! Pecan trees are considered weak wooded and therefore are notorious for producing broken limbs and debris throughout the year. Not only that, but also the leaves, pecans, and shucks that drop in the fall can also be a hassle. Any dead, diseased, or damaged limbs should immediately be removed back to a side branch or the truck. Pruning cuts should be made perpendicular to the branch you are removing and about one inch away from the branch union. Debris, whether it is pecans, shucks, leaves, or limbs should be picked off the ground as soon as possible. Many insects and diseases utilize this contact with the ground to overwinter in the soil and return the following year.

One of the most significant pests of pecans is the pecan weevil because they cause damage directly to the nut. Pecan weevil adults emerge from August through September, crawl or fly into the tree, and mate. Female weevils then puncture the nut and lay their eggs inside causing the nut to drop from the tree. The larvae will feed on the nut inside the shuck and emerge through a seemingly perfect circular hole to burrow into the ground. They will remain there for 1 to 2 years until they
pupate and emerge as adults the following August or September. Pecan Weevils can be controlled in two main ways. One is through sanitation. As soon as any nuts fall, ensure they are picked up and removed from the property. Pecan weevils can fly, but not very well. Research has shown that weevils typically emerge after a significant rain in late August, or early September. A product with the active ingredient carbaryl can be effective by treating the ground beneath the trees after a significant rain event in late August or early September. Make sure that you follow all chemical label instructions for application, as the label is the law.

Pecan trees should be trained when young to one, main central leader with side branches coming off at, or more than, 60-degree angles. While this is not possible if you have inherited an older tree, it does not mean you should be indiscriminately pruning or topping your trees around your house. When it comes to pruning pecan trees, there are many times when people are infected with the neighbor virus. In a home situation, the practice of topping (removing all branches above a specified height) a pecan is NOT recommended. Topping can reduce the tree’s productivity for a minimum of three years and potentially kill the tree over time. If you are trying to renovate an old tree, hire a trained professional (Check out the International Society of Arboriculture website to find a certified arborist near you at www.isa-arbor.com.) that is bonded and insured.

Pecans are true beauties of the southern culture. With a little attention and care, pecans can be productive and beautiful for 75 years or more. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this or any other topic, please feel free to 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.