

The All-American Pecan

By Kay Bushnell

Pecans are native American nuts with an almost sweet flavor. They are ideal for desserts and a flavorful addition to savory dishes. Pecans and other nuts make eating low on the food chain a nutritious and pleasurable experience.

Native Americans Algonquians cracked pecans and other forest nuts, crushed the kernels to make nut milk, and used the remaining pulp to enrich other foods. Today, the same basic process employed by the Algonquians produces the delicious nut milks that are found in today's markets and created in home kitchens.

Enterprising colonial farmers learned about pecans from the Algonquians. Settlers carried pecan saplings with them throughout the American south. Pecan trees flourished, and pecans became an important market crop as new varieties and efficient shelling equipment were developed. Today there are four hundred varieties of pecans that are grown mostly in the United States and also in Australia, South Africa, Brazil, and Israel. In Georgia pecan trees that are said to be a thousand years old still produce a few edible nuts. Pecan trees may grow as high and wide as one hundred feet with a trunk that is six feet in diameter.

Discard pecans or other shelled nuts that are shriveled or discolored or that have an unpleasant oily taste or odor. Place shelled pecans in a container with a tight lid and store them in the freezer to preserve freshness. They can be frozen for up to a year.

It's best to avoid pecans or any nuts that are roasted in oil and salted. Besides, why detract from the rich, natural flavor of nuts by immersing them in hot oil and adding salt? If you want roasted nuts, it is best to roast them as you need them. Place them in a shallow baking pan in a 350° oven for 10-15 minutes until they turn slightly darker. Some cooks toast pecans lightly in a dry skillet over medium heat, stirring them until they are barely browned. Roasted nuts become rancid more quickly than raw ones and must be kept in the freezer to prevent rancidity.

Like all nuts, pecans are storehouses of nutrients. In addition to numerous phytochemicals (beneficial components found only in plants) they contain a significant amount of vitamin A and protein, as well as zinc, iron and calcium. Their generous fat content (70% of calories) is mostly unsaturated. Dietitians advise that fat in moderate amounts that is part of a whole food is a much healthier form of dietary fat than butter, oil, or lard. A study described in the *Harvard Heart Letter* found that participants who consumed nuts frequently (5+ times a week) had half the risk of a heart attack or coronary death as those who rarely ate them.

Chopped pecans bestow sensational flavor on almost any baked good. Who can resist pecan pie, pecan tartlets, or pecan streusel on pies and cakes? Chopped pecans can substitute for their distant relatives, walnuts, in vegetable loaves, meatless burgers and balls, and can add flavor and texture to green salads and fruit salads. A sprinkling of chopped pecans is a delicious addition to pancake batter.