

Native Wild Foods

Nuts to you!

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz

Florida hosts a large number of native trees with edible nuts. Many of them are partial to the northern part of the state, but enough species grow throughout the peninsula to whet every gatherer's appetite.

Hickories.

Four of the five species of hickory nuts, genus *Carya*, are sweet for eating. The pignut hickory (*Carya glabra*) is the most widespread, covering the whole state except for the southernmost counties. The nut is thick-shelled, and can be sometimes sweet and sometimes bitter.

The mockernut (*Carya tomentosa*), grows in the northern third of the state,



MOCKERNUT HICKORY

and does not come as far south as central Florida. The nut of this tree is also thick-shelled and sweet.

Scrub hickory (*Carya floridana*) is not very common, growing in the few remaining undeveloped scrub areas of the central ridge. The nut is sweet.

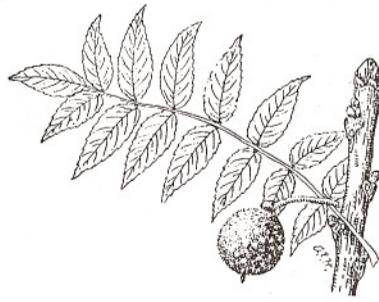
The water hickory (*Carya aquatica*) is the only hickory with a really bad-tasting, bitter nut meat. It is edible, however, and not harmful if you like bitter! The nut looks like a pushed-together pecan. Range is all of Florida except for the southern tip, always in wet places, swamps, river edges, etc.

The pecan (*Carya illinoensis*) is, of course, not native to Florida, but to the Mississippi valley. It has escaped from cultivation in some places in the northern part of Florida, and can be planted in yards.

Walnut.

Black Walnuts (*Juglans nigra*) are famous for their especially good taste. The tree grows in north Florida in upland habitat. The hull makes a good brown

Drawings by Mrs. A.E. Hoyle
Forest Trees of Florida, Florida Forest Service



EASTERN BLACK WALNUT

dye, including dying your hands when you gather them! The local people put the nuts in the driveway and drive over them to remove the hull.

Chinquapins.

The chinquapins are another group of small trees that offer nuts to eat. The Florida chinquapin (*Castanea floridana* = *alnifolia*) grows as far south as central Florida, with some found at Wekiwa Springs State Park. It has a good, sweet, but very small nut, and its cover has prickles all over it.

The Allegheny chinquapin that grows in the Panhandle (*Castanea pumila*) also has a pretty good nut.

Pinecones.

Pine trees (*Pinus* spp.) also have edible winged nuts inside the "scales" of each pine cone. All are edible either roasted or raw (except for the undesirable invader, the Australian pine, which does not have cones or edible seeds). The pine tree with the biggest nut is the sugar pine with enormous seeds that grows in western U.S. The longleaf, (*Pinus palustris*), is the pine in Florida with the largest seeds. It grows all over the state except for the southeast counties.

Beechnuts.

American beech trees (*Fagus grandifolia*) grow abundantly in north Florida south to Alachua County. The triangular nut has an outside covering with burrs all over it. The nut meat is sweet, but small, and the shell is hard to remove. The Indians pressed oil from it.

Oaks.

The acorns from oak trees (*Quercus* spp.) are all edible. The white oak group is best for eating. Red and black oak group has more tannin and require leaching to get out the bitter acids. (See article on oaks in the Winter 89/90 issue of *The Palmetto*, including uses and recipes.)

Others.

Basswood (*Tilia americana*) is sometimes called the American linden. Its



BASSWOOD

sweet nuts ripen in the middle of the summer. They are extremely good, but small. They're worth seeking, though, because you can carry a pocketful and pop them in your mouth, bite out the meat, and spit out the shell. (Suggest reading: *Trees of Northern Florida*, by Kurz and Godfrey, Basswood Family, pages 229-233.)

The American hornbeam, or blue beech (*Carpinus caroliniana*), has edible nuts, but they're so small they're hardly worth the trouble. Maybe if you're starving... The range is from Orange County north.

Key West has planted almond trees in the median of the highway. One time, when Dick was there, the almonds were falling off the trees onto the median strip. He gathered about a bushel of the delicious nuts!

And how can we omit the coconut in a discussion of edible nuts? Of course, the coconut palm is not native, and grows only on the southern shores of the state, but it lacks some of the drawbacks of other nuts—though it's a tough nut to crack, it's very large and its meat is sweet!

Non-nuts.

Groundnuts (*Apios americana*) are a vining legume that have fleshy edible tubers on the roots like a string of nuts, from the size of a dime to the size of a hen egg. They have to be dug out of the ground instead of gathered from trees! They can be boiled, or sliced and fried, and are very tasty, but eat them while they are still warm—they're not good cold. They're especially good in stir-fried meals.

Yellownut sedge (*Cyperus esculentus*), also known as chufa, nut grass, or earth almond, has tubers that can be eaten out of hand, roasted and ground to make a coffee substitute, or mashed and made into flour. The tubers can be made into a good drink by mashing them, adding water, and letting the mixture set for a couple days. Then strain it through a cloth.

Fall is the time to go nutting. So get out there soon and enjoy!