

# Home Preservation of Pecans

*Brian A. Nummer, Ph.D.  
National Center for Home Food Preservation  
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(Photo: USDA ARS).

The pecan is a member of the Hickory family and is native to the Mississippi River valley. It grows in much of the southern half of the U.S. providing a beautiful shade tree with the bonus of fall fruit. Although pecans are typically associated with the holidays or fancy candy dishes, there's no need to wait until the holidays to savor the crunchy texture and satisfying flavor of pecans. Pecans are packed with so much nutrition; they should be enjoyed all year long!

## **Harvesting and Shelling**

Pecans are typically harvested in October through December. Pecans are mature and ready to harvest anytime after the shuck begins to open. It is easier to wait and harvest nuts by shaking or thrashing branches after shucks are wide open and partially dried. However, the longer you wait, the more pecans that may be lost to predators.

Nuts harvested early in the season have high moisture content and need to be dried before storage. Pecans harvested early can contain 25-30% moisture. Water content decreases in pecans harvested later in the season. Pecans should be stored at a moisture content of about 4%. Dry them in the shell in thin layers on elevated screens or hang them in small mesh bags in a well-ventilated area at room temperature out of direct sunlight. Within 2 weeks the nut meats should be dry enough to snap when bent, an indication they are ready for storage or immediate use.

Alternatively pecans can be dried using forced air or an electric dehydrator. If using a dehydrator, temperatures above 100 degrees F. will reduce the quality of the nut. Using a dehydrator can reduce drying time to 24-48 hours, speeding up the process and considerably reducing mold problems. Oven drying is not recommended because there is no air circulation and most ovens cannot be operated below 100 degrees F. (Source: Michigan State University Extension).

To shell pecans: Place nuts in a damp place overnight to prevent brittleness of the kernels during cracking. Some home food preservers recommend soaking pecans in boiling hot water for 10 minutes or microwaving 2 cups of pecans in 1 cup of water for 5 to 6 minutes on high. Shell nuts, keeping kernels as nearly whole as possible, using a nutcracker or simply a hammer. Spread pecans in a thin layer to dry for 24 hours.

**Storage**

Pecans are perishable because of their high oil content and they must be stored properly to maintain good quality. At home, unshelled pecans can be stored in a cool, dry place. Shelled pecans should be either refrigerated or frozen. (Source: Georgia Pecan Commission).

**Refrigerating or Freezing**

Pecan nuts must be stored away from air and light. Pecans will also readily absorb odors from almost any material, including other fruits and vegetables. The best storage conditions can be obtained using vacuum-sealed bags or jars. In the absence of a vacuum sealer, zipper lock bags or airtight containers will work. For flexible packaging be sure and press out all of the air possible before storage. Place sealed bags or vacuum packages in the refrigerator or freezer. When frozen pecans can be thawed and refrozen repeatedly during the two-year freezing period without loss of flavor or texture. (Source: Texas Pecan Growers Association).

<b>Approximate storage times of pecans</b>			
	Pantry 70-80 degrees F.	Refrigerator 38-40 degrees F.	Freezer 0 degrees F
Pecan Halves	2 months	9 months	2 years
Pecan Pieces	1 month	5 months	1 year
Unshelled Pecans	4 months	18 months	2-4 years
*based on research work of Dr. J.G. Woodroof and E.K. Keaton at the Georgia Experiment Station, Griffin, GA			

**Canning nut meats**

(Source: University of Georgia, *So Easy to Preserve*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1999)

**Hot Pack (dry)** – Shell nuts. Spread a single layer of nut meats on baking pans and place in a 250°F oven. Stir occasionally heating only until the nut meats are dry but not browned. Watch carefully that they don't scorch. Pack hot nuts into hot, clean jars, leaving ½ inch headspace. Do not add any liquid to the jars. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids and process.

**Option 1** – Process in a Boiling Water Canner *with the water in the canner 1 to 2 inches below the tops of the jars:*

		<b>Process Time at Altitudes of</b>			
<b>Style of Pack</b>	<b>Jar Size</b>	<b>0 - 1,000 ft</b>	<b>1,001 - 3,000 ft</b>	<b>3,000 - 6,000 ft</b>	<b>Above 6,000 ft</b>
Hot	Half-Pints or Pints	<b>30 min</b>	35	40	45

**Option 2** – Process in a Dial Gauge Pressure Canner OR in a Weighted Gauge Canner at the following pressures dependent upon altitude:

**Table 2.** Recommended process time for **Nut Meats** in a dial-gauge pressure canner

			Canner Gauge Pressure (PSI) at Altitudes of			
Style of Pack	Jar Size	Process Time	0 - 2,000 ft	2,001 - 4,000 ft	4,001 - 6,000 ft	6,001 - 8,000 ft
Hot	Half-Pints or Pints	10 min	6 lb	7 lb	8 lb	9 lb

**Table 3.** Recommended process time for **Nut Meats** in a Weighted-gauge pressure canner

			Canner Gauge Pressure (PSI) at Altitudes of	
Style of Pack	Jar Size	Process Time	0 - 1,000 ft	Above 1,000 ft
Hot	Half-Pints or Pints	10 min	5 lb	10 lb

### Frequently Asked Questions

**How do I toast pecans?**

To toast pecans spread them on a baking sheet in an oven and heat for 15 to 20 minutes at 350 degrees F. (Source: USDA. Nuts in family meals. 1971).

**Are moldy pecans safe to eat?**

No. Throw them out. Some people might take a risk and eat moldy foods. In many instances, the individual will simply not feel well after eating moldy food. However, molds on nuts (and grain products) could be a significant hazard. The molds that can grow on nuts can produce mycotoxins. Mycotoxins are highly poisonous compounds produced by molds or fungi. If one sees mold growth, there is the possibility of mycotoxins being present. Molds love moist conditions. Therefore, it is important to keep dry foods dry, particularly nuts and grain products, to prevent mold growth.

**I boiled some pecans in the shell then left them at room temperature for several weeks. Can they be used and can they be frozen now?**

Most likely, No. High moisture invites mold spoilage and encourages rancidity of the pecan oils.

**Are pecans lying on the ground safe to eat?**

"If you have pecans in your yard, you need to pick them up promptly and get them out of the weather. Lay them out in a single layer in a dry place. If they have too much moisture they'll taste green, invite mold, and won't store well until they're dried down. If you put them in a refrigerator or in a bag while they're still green and wet they will turn rancid and dark and spoil.

### **How can I tell if my pecans are rancid?**

Rancid nuts have a bitter, unpleasant oily taste. Rancid pecans may also have a dark color. A rancid nut can ruin an otherwise perfectly prepared dish, so always taste several nuts from the batch before you use them. Rancidity cannot be reversed. Discard any affected pecans.

### **What is pecan butter?**

Pecan butter is ground up pecans that form a paste. It is a similar process to grinding up peanuts to make peanut butter. Pecan butter should be made in small batches and kept refrigerated or frozen. Homemade nut butters can quickly go rancid at room temperature unlike their commercially prepared cousins that have special additives.

### **I just have to know. Is it PEE-CAN or PA-KAWN?**

A 2003 national survey found that "PEE-can" is the overwhelming choice among Americans. Nearly half of consumers (45 percent, including almost seven out of 10 living in the Northeast) prefer this pronunciation of the all-American tree nut, with the rest of the nation roughly split between pa-KAWN and PEE-kawn (Source: National Pecan Shellers Association).

### **References:**

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Contact:

National Center for Home Food Preservation  
208 Hoke Smith Annex  
The University of Georgia  
Athens, GA 30602-4356

Tel: (706) 542-3773

Fax: (706) 542-1979

Email: [nchfp@uga.edu](mailto:nchfp@uga.edu)

Web: <http://www.homefoodpreservation.com>