

## **Slowly, but surely growing nuts**

**By Jeff McDonald**

Neighbors can say that he's "ready for the nut farm," or that he's "just plain nuts," and it's a charge that Larry Dalton finds hard to deny. In fact, it's a pretty good description of a guy that spends most of his free time preening a backyard grove of hickory, pecan, and walnut trees.

"I guess it comes with the territory," Dalton said, taking a break from weeding on a quiet ridge in northern Jessamine County where he lives with his wife Katheleen. "If you are going to take up nut growing as a hobby, you are opening yourself up for the jokes and the ribbing."

Twenty-eight years ago, when Larry Dalton set out to find a pecan tree to plant in his back yard, he found that the available nut trees just weren't all they were cracked up to be.

"I wanted something that would grow around here," Dalton said, "but the trees that I was finding weren't suitable for Kentucky's climate. After lots of trial and error I realized that the problem was in the southern varieties that are marketed in this area. Unless you're happy with a non-bearing shade tree, you have to go to a northern root stock to survive the winters around here."

His quest eventually led him to the Kentucky Nut Growers Association. Today Dalton is a vice president of the group that provides a support network for nut growers throughout the state.

The two-acre spread behind Dalton's home is no picturesque fruit orchard with tidy rows of small trees. The nut-bearing trees seem to be laid out at random and grow quite large. Grass pathways snake in every direction through expansive beds of mulch that surround the trunks.

"I try to cheat the soil by adding in a lot of organic material," Dalton said in reference to the clay-based and rocky soil. "We don't have a deep layer of topsoil in Jessamine County." A local tree service regularly dumps their unwanted grindings on his property, and in the fall he scavenges hundreds of bags of leaves from his neighbors to use as mulch that improves the soil and locks in moisture around the trunks.

"We've got a relatively short growing season here in Kentucky," Dalton said. "This country's large commercial operations are found in Georgia and Alabama, and generally anywhere from South Carolina on down."

For the most part, the trees found in Dalton's yard were not started with seedlings. Rather, to get a hearty tree of a certain variety, wood from that variety is grafted onto a seedling rootstock (what we call the trunk.) Consequently, Dalton has become an expert at the techniques of grafting.

“There are as many ways to graft wood as there are to whittle wood,” said Dalton. “I can graft onto a rootstock and in three years I can be producing, instead of waiting 20 years with a seedling, and not knowing what I’ll get.”

Some of Dalton’s tree grafts are a kind of a testing ground for different nut varieties. “This tree started with a pecan root stock,” said Dalton. “Because of grafting, this one tree alone bears more than ten varieties.” The nut varieties that do the best in the grafting experiments are singled out for production in future seasons.

Most of his trees originated with cuttings from Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio and West Virginia. Some come from farther away. “This black walnut came from the agricultural department at the University of Nebraska,” said Dalton, “It’s called Sparks 127. “ His oldest tree is a 28-year-old Carpathian Walnut grown from a seedling.

Bandit, a Jack Russell Terrier, and Lucy, a rat terrier, are part of Dalton’s strategy for intimidating the squirrels that might want to move in to the nut-lovers paradise.

The squirrels are just the beginning of the many challenges facing the casual nut grower. “The blue jays are the worst. They go after the pecans,” said Dalton. “And then there are the crows and the woodpeckers. Grackles love to peck on walnut hulls. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers drill holes in the trunks.” If Dalton’s trees withstand the animal onslaught, he still needs to be wary of blight, drought and boring insects. “I’m looking into a new method this year to trap pecan weevils.”

So how many trees are we talking about in this forest of nuts? “I wouldn’t even guess,” said Dalton. “I’ve probably got fifty or more.”

And that’s not to mention the vegetable garden, the plums, the apples, the persimmons, and the *paw paws*. “The pawpaw is North America’s largest native fruit” Dalton explains. “The orange, the peach and all the others larger ones you can think of are not indigenous.”

Paw paws have become a kind of pet project for the Kentucky Nut Growers Association. They’ve been working in conjunction with Kentucky State University on a research project that focuses on the agricultural and medical potential of the unusual fruit. “Paw paws could hold the secret to an organic pesticide,” Dalton said. “Nothing will eat on them.”

“My favorite is the shag bark hickory,” Dalton says. “It’s the best overall nut to eat. I like them raw but they’re not bad in a brownie either.”

Another of Dalton’s favorites is the *hican*. “It’s something that most people have never heard of. It’s a cross between hickory and pecan. It’s got a taste all of their own.” Varieties such as the McAllister hican have been around for at least a hundred years.

The walnuts that Dalton produces are a point of pride. They are unlike what you find in the store. "It's a superior nut with a thinner shell and a bigger kernel," Dalton said. "People want them as fast as I can produce them. I sell and trade with a few neighbors and friends. It's all word of mouth. I'm not into large scale marketing and production."

"A lot of people think that you are supposed to let walnuts lay around on the ground until the hull turns black and starts rotting," Dalton said. "But, that makes the kernels strong-tasting and dark. You need to get it hulled out as soon as you can. Set them out to dry for a month and a half, that lets the flavor set, then you can get to cracking."

The benefits of nut-growing are many. "Compared to most fruits, nuts are not perishable" Dalton said. "If you hull them out and pack them in plastic bags, they'll stay in a freezer 10 years and never change their taste."

"I like the fact that I can walk from one end of my property to the other and still be in a nice shade." That can be a blessing after spending a hot day at a construction site on his day-time job as an electrician.

Furthermore nuts are a healthy snack to nibble on. They are loaded with monounsaturated fat which, eaten in moderation, can actually lower your risk of heart disease and heart attack.

After clocking in over 40 years as an electrician, Dalton is looking to retire within the next two years. Will he be off to Florida and leave the nut farming to someone else? "There's not enough hill country in Florida to suit me. I can't take that much flatland. I'll be right here with the nut trees. You could say I've got some roots here."

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