

Essays

Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Persimmons

from *A Field Guide to North American Haiku*¹

by Charles Trumbull

Persimmons are grown around the world.² The oriental persimmon, *Diospyros kaki*, is native to China, spread to Japan in the seventh century, and was imported to California, southern Europe, and South America in the nineteenth century. This is the persimmon known as 柿 (*kaki*) in Japan. There are thousands of cultivars, but *kaki* are basically of two types, astringent and sweet. The astringent type has a high level of tannin and is inedible until fully ripened and the pulp has turned jelly-like. The most common cultivar of this type in Japan and the U.S. is the *hachiya* (蜂屋柿 *hachiyagaki*).

Sweet cultivars—smaller and flatter than the *hachiya*—may be consumed while still firm and are commonly sliced for salads and fruit bowls or cooked or baked in breads and puddings. Sweet varieties include *fuyū* (富有 or 富有柿 *fuyūgaki*) and *jirō* (次郎 or 次郎柿柿 *jirōgaki*). A specially sweet variety called Sharon fruit is marketed in Israel.

Shibugaki 渋柿 is the name given a bitter persimmon, which is peeled, hung on a string or pole, and massaged daily to evaporate the juices and leave the sugars that coat the outside of the fruit. When dried for preservation, these fruits are called 吊柿 *tsurushigaki* (hanging persimmons). In the old days when sugar was too expensive for common folk, these dried, sweet persimmons were used instead of sugar. 干柿 *hoshigaki* are still very popular confection in Japan.

吊柿鳥に顎なき夕べかな

tsurushigaki tori ni ago naki yūbe kana

hanging persimmons
birds without jaws
at evening

Iijima Haruko, retranslation after Fay Aoyagi
in *Blue Willow Haiku World* blog, October 16, 2015

The leaves of the persimmon tree are also edible and are pickled, fermented, and sold as a snack and used to wrap sushi. Persimmon wood is in demand for fine cabinetry, musical instruments, sports equipment, and the like.

In Japan, every stage of the development and processing of persimmons is carefully observed and accorded appropriate *kigo* (season words), for example:

Blossoms (柿の花 *kaki no hana*)—pink for male flowers and off-white for female—midsummer *kigo*

Hanging new curtains—
blooms already showing on
the persimmon tree

David Burleigh, *Winter Sunlight* (1992)

Growth of leaves (柿の葉 *kaki no ha*) and new leaves (柿若葉 *kakiwakaba*)—also midsummer *kigo*

柿若葉風にゆらゆら径の上
kaki wakaba fū ni yurayura wataru no ue

fresh persimmon leaves
shadows swaying on the path
in the gentle wind

Murakami Shinsei, in Ehime International Haiku Club, *An Anthology of International Haiku*, vol. 7, April 2010 – March 2011

Falling blossoms (柿の花散る *kaki no hana chiru*)

柿の花昨日散しは黄ばみ見ゆ
kaki no hana kinō chirishi wa kibami miyu

The flowers of the persimmon;
Those which fell yesterday
Look yellowish.

Buson, in R. H. Blyth, *Haiku 2: Spring* (1950)

Leaves changing color (柿紅葉 *kaki momiji*). The leaves are beautiful in themselves, but their changing color and falling is considered especially interesting, perhaps because that is the signal that the fruit is beginning to ripen. Japanese children collect the colored persimmon leaves.

柿の葉や仏の色に成るとちる
kaki no ha ya hotoke no iro ni naru to chiru

persimmon leaves
turn Buddha-colored . . .
then fall

Issa, trans. David G. Lanoue, *Haiku of Kobayashi Issa*
website

“Buddha-colored” = “golden”

Waiting for the fruit to ripen. The persimmon fruits remain ripening in the tree long after the leaves are gone. William J. Higginson makes the point that “Waiting for persimmons to ripen is a classic test of patience in Japan.”³

此の柿は澁いか烏見てのみぞ
kono kaki wa shibui ka karasu mite nomi zo

persimmons so tart
not even crows
give 'em a glance!

Umezawa Bokusui, trans. Adam L. Kern, *The Penguin Book of Haiku* (2018)

impatience the taste of an unripe persimmon

S. B. Friedman, *Modern Haiku* 38:3 (Autumn 2007)

persimmon still hanging the extra day of the year

Jim Kacian, The Betty Drevniok Award 2008, 3rd Prize

But birds love persimmons too, and choosing the optimal time to pick the luscious ripe fruit, before the birds get to them, is a high art. The *World Kigo Database* notes, “Usually the *kaki* fruit high up in the tree are eaten by crows as a favorite food, and the fallen fruit are eaten by the badgers (*tanuki*) to provide for their winter fat.”

A last persimmon
hanging between bare branches —
the hesitant sun

David Burleigh, *Winter Sunlight* (1992)

柿一つつくねんとして時雨哉
kaki hitotsu tsukunen to shite shigure kana

one persimmon
droops listlessly . . .
winter rain

Issa, trans. David G. Lanoue, *Haiku of Kobayashi Issa*
website

Lanoue notes, “*kaki hitotsu* means ‘a persimmon’ not, as I first thought, ‘a persimmon tree.’ One tree would be *ippon*, not *hitotsu*... It is the custom in some provinces to leave one persimmon on the tree, probably for birds.”

Topmost bough: one last persimmon for the winter birds

James Kirkup, *Short Takes* (1993)

in “pecking order”

mockers, jays, siskins, finches . . .

the last persimmon

George Knox, *Modern Haiku* 25:2 (Summer 1994)

一茶忌の柿喰ふ椋鳥をゆるし置く
issaki no kaki ku'u muku o yurushi oku

Issa's Memorial Day—

I let the gray starling feed on
a persimmon

Yoshino Yoshiko, trans. Lee Gurga and Emiko
Miyashita, in Yoshino Yoshiko, *Tsuru* (2001)

Issa's Memorial Day, 一茶忌 *Issa ki*, is January 5.

a lone persimmon
lets go of the tree

Bob Boldman, *Eating a Melon* (1981)

The lure and pleasure of eating a ripe persimmon. 柿 *kaki*, the fruit, is a *kigo* for late autumn, the period of activity and most interest to persimmon eaters.

Shiki used persimmons as an inducement or a reward for hard work:

三千の俳句を閲し柿二つ

sanzen no haiku o kemishi kaki futatsu

after judging
three thousand haiku
two persimmons

Shiki-Kinen Museum English Volunteers, ed. and trans., *If Someone Asks ...* (2001), 48. 'Working all day into the night, finally scraping the bottom of the haiku box' There was a haiku box for submissions to his column in the Nippon Newspaper beside Shiki's pillow. We can imagine how good the persimmons tasted after reading through the many haiku, especially because they were his favorite fruit.

Early American senryu master Clement Hoyt was not surprised by Shiki's indulgence:

Shiki, no wonder
after three thousand haiku
persimmons were sweet
Storm of Stars (1970), 148

But Shiki could also find solace in a persimmon at a time of grief:

芭蕉忌に參らずひとり柿を喰ふ
Bashōki ni mairazu hitori kaki o kuu

Bashō's death date
I miss the ceremony
but eat a persimmon alone

trans. C. Trumbull from the Japanese as well as the Russian translation by Aleksandr Dolin, in *Цветы ямабуки* (*Tsvety yamabuki*; 1999; Mountain Roses), 40

Shiki understood the risks of overindulgence:

柿あまた食ひけるよりの病かな
kaki amata kuikeru yori no yamai kana

Ill,
From overeating
Persimmons.

R. H. Blyth, *Haiku 4: Autumn–Winter* (1952)

Yet, he chose to overdo it anyway:

我が好きの柿を食はれぬ病かな
waga suki no kaki o kuwarenu yamai kana

The persimmons I love so much,
Can't be eaten:
I'm ill.

R. H. Blyth, *Haiku 4: Autumn–Winter* (1952)

柿喰の俳句好みしと傳ふべし
kaki kui no haiku konomishi to tsutaubeshi

He sized it all up with this verse under the headnote “After I Die”:

柿喰の俳句好みしと傳ふべし
kakikui no haiku konomishi to tsutau beshi

you can report
I ate persimmons
and loved haiku

trans. Stephen Addiss, *The Art of Haiku* (2012)

There is a note of sadness in Izen's haiku, as well:

別るゝや柿食いながら坂の上
wakaruru ya kaki kui nagara saka no ue

Parting,
 And walking up the slope,
 eating a persimmon.

Hirose Izen, trans. R. H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku 1*
 (1963), 177 “This verse was composed in the 7th year
 of Genroku, when saying good-bye to Bashō.”

Patricia Neubauer seems to channel William Carlos Williams, the
 poet who ate the plums in his icebox:

last ripe persimmon
 after everyone goes to bed
 — I eat it

Patricia Neubauer, *Frogpond* 16:2 (Fall–Winter 1993)

persimmon
 the bruised part sweetest

John Sandbach, *Step into Sky* (2018) #35, p. 43

in my loneliness
 I let the persimmon
 get overripe

John Ziemba, in Raffael de Gruttola, Lawrence
 Rungren, and John Ziemba, eds., *The Ant’s Afternoon:
 Haiku and Senryu by Members of the Boston Haiku Society*
 (December 1990)

Socioeconomic significance

Beyond the cult of growing and eating the fruit, persimmon trees
 had a broader importance in old Japan. First, as is pointed out in the
World Kigo Database, “dried *kaki* fruit was sometimes the only food the

poor farmers in the Edo period could eat in winter, since they had to give away all their rice to the authorities for tax purposes. Therefore, the *kaki* trees around each farm house were pure necessity to feed the hungry children.” It follows that owning many persimmon trees was a sign of prosperity. Bashō composed two haiku that illustrate the importance of persimmon trees to the economy:

里古りて柿の木持たぬ家もなし
sato furite kaki no ki motanu ie mo nashi

a village grown old:
no house without
a persimmon tree

David Landis Barnhill, trans., *Bashō's Haiku* (2004) #702

祖父親孫の栄えや柿蜜柑
ōji oya mago no sakae ya kaki mikan

grandfather and parents
the prosperity of grandchildren
in persimmons and oranges

Jane Reichhold, trans., *Basho: Complete Haiku* (2008) #749

This old neighborhood.
The house where I used to live
The persimmon tree.

Jerry Ball, *The Sound of Shoes* (1984)

where we lived
persimmons still clinging
here and there

Joseph Robello, *Modern Haiku* 49:1 (Winter–Spring
2018), 106

One owner of a persimmon orchard was Mukai Kyorai, a wealthy merchant and chief among the ten main disciples of Bashō. Kyorai built a hermitage that he called Rakushisha (落柿舎, Hut or Hermitage of Fallen Persimmons) in the district of Saga-Arashiyama west of Kyoto. As the story goes, Kyorai had cultivated 40 persimmon trees on the property and was just planning to harvest and sell the fruit when an overnight windstorm took the whole crop, hence the name “Hut of Fallen Persimmons.” Bashō visited Rakushisha several times and wrote his *Saga Diary* (嵯峨日記 *Saga nikki*) during a stay there in 1691.⁴

Kyorai’s house
 even if they could be too bitter⁵
 ripe persimmons

Bruce Ross, *Mainichi Daily News Daily Haiku Selection*, January 10, 2012, and *Mainichi Daily News Annual Selection 2012*

Persimmons outside Japan

Nearly all of the persimmons sold in the United States are of the Oriental *kaki* type cultivated in California, notably in the San Joaquin Valley. Another species of the plant, however, *Diospyros virginiana*, is native to the eastern and southern U.S. and grows wild in several states. In fact, the word “persimmon” derives from a word in a native American language. American haiku pioneer Nick Virgilio wrote:

A wild persimmon
 beyond the reach of the raccoon:
 the autumn moon.

Modern Haiku 7:2 (May 1976)

Peggy Willis Lyles of Georgia named the fruit in several haiku:

first frost . . .
on a silver card tray
wild persimmons

Modern Haiku 18:3 (Autumn 1987)

wild persimmons . . .
a woman at the roadside
wiggles her last tooth

Frogpond 14:2 (Summer 1991)

Tennessee resident John Wills mused on the trees:

To wander there . . .
the meadow where the wild
persimmons blow!

Young Leaves (1970)

The persimmon is often seen as emblematic of Japan and suggestive of haiku. James R. and Mary C. Taylor published a haiku journal called *Persimmon* in Michigan from 1997 to 1999. A very active website called *Caqui—Revista Brasileira de Haicai*⁶ and the publishing house Edições Caqui are run by the Grêmio Haicai Ipê (Ipê Haiku Guild) in São Paulo, Brazil. *Kaki*, along with haiku and other aspects of Japanese culture, came to Brazil in the 1890s and still flourish there, especially among the large Japanese Brazilian population.

<i>Já o sol caiu:</i>	Already sundown
<i>as frutas dos caquizeiros,</i>	the fruits of the persimmon trees
<i>no escuro, brilhando . . .</i>	in the dark, shining

H. Masuda Goga, from Goga, Roberto Saito, and Eunice Arruda, eds., *Haicai: A poesia do kigô* (March 1995); trans. C. Trumbull

Música do vento. Music of the wind
Por um instante me ausento For a moment I'm gone
Do pomar de caquis. from the *caqui* orchard

Teruka Oda, from Débora Novaes de Castro, ed.,
Hai-kais ao sol: I antologia de hai-kais (1995); trans. C.
 Trumbull

Persimmon as metaphor or transference

Haiku poets find aspects of persimmons useful in their writing about the human condition. Issa, for example, was fascinated with the astringency (渋味 *shibumi*, usually translated as “sour”) of persimmons—sour persimmons (渋柿 *shibugaki*), especially mountain persimmons (山柿 *yamagaki*):

渋柿をはむは烏のまま子哉
yama-gaki mo hotoke no me ni wa ama karan

eating the sour
 persimmon, the crow
 stepchild

Issa, trans. David G. Lanoue, *Haiku of Kobayashi Issa* website

Lanoue explains, “Issa was a stepchild. Here, he imagines that the crow, eating the astringent persimmon, must be an unloved stepchild—a way of writing about his own childhood while seeming to be writing about a crow.” He dotted the “i” with this haiku four years later (1820):

渋柿をこらへてくうや京の児
shibugaki o koraete kuu ya miyako no ko

enduring the sour
 persimmon . . .
 Kyoto child

Issa, trans. Lanoue, *Haiku of Kobayashi Issa* website

渋かるかしらねど柿の初ちぎり
shibukaro ka shiranedo kaki no hatsuchigiri

I don't know
if it will be bitter —
the first persimmon

Chiyo-ni, trans. Stephen Addiss, *The Art of Haiku* (2012)

quarreling with my lover the persimmon moon

Frank K. Robinson, *Cicada* 2:3 (1978)

after the quarrel
aftertaste
of persimmons

Geraldine Clinton Little, *Frogpond* 7:2 (1984)

listening to
the drama queen
I peel a persimmon

Fay Aoyagi, *In Borrowed Shoes* (2006)

Persimmons are inextricably associated with Masaoka Shiki. He wrote more than 100 haiku on the fruit. His most famous one captured his reaction upon biting into a persimmon:

柿喰へば鐘が鳴るなり法隆寺
kaki kueba kane ga naru nari Hōryūji

As I eat a persimmon
The temple bell tolls at
Hōryūji.

trans. Donald Keene, *The Winter Sun Shines In* (2013)

In their book *If Someone Asks ...* (2001), the Shiki-Kinen Museum English Volunteers in Matsuyama, who are custodians of Shiki's writings, explain Shiki's haiku:

Taking a rest at a tea shop at Hōryūji temple. When Shiki was on his way back to Tōkyō from Matsuyama, he stopped in Nara on October 24. He was excited to see the area, the home of so much of the ancient history of Japan. The sound he heard was actually from a bell at Tōdaiji temple, so this haiku is not a true record. He probably used the temple Hōryūji because the area around it is famous for persimmons, this favorite fruit, and it is the oldest standing Buddhist temple in Japan. The sound of the name, too, is more like the long, fading tones of a temple bell.

The peripatetic poet Santōka wrote a number of haiku linking ripe persimmons to the happy occasion of the arrival of his mail. He was usually on the road, but he planned ahead and picked up his letters at pre-specified spots on his itinerary. Santōka was fond of both persimmon fruit and leaves.

やっと郵便がきて
それから熟柿がおちるだけ

yatto yūbin ga kite
sorekara jukushi no ochiru dake

Finally the mail came and now only ripe persimmons drop

Hiroaki Sato, *Santoka: Grass and Tree Cairn* (2002)

しぐれて かきのはの いよいよつくしく
shigurete kaki no ha no iyooyo utsukushiku

The rain-soaked persimmon leaves
Become even more beautiful.

trans. John Stevens, in Santōka, *Mountain Tasting* #116

Many modern and contemporary poets—from Japan and the West—write about persimmons, too, and often explore aspects of the plant beyond its astringency or tastiness. Here is a small sampler.

空襲警報るいるいとして柿あかし
kūshū keihō ruirui to shite kaki akashi

air raid sirens
one after another
persimmons are red

Santōka, trans. Scott Watson, “Weeds We’d Wed,”
Tohoku Gakuin Review (2000) #48

日がさして熟柿の中の種みゆる
hi ga sashite jukushi no naka no tane miyuru

when sunlight falls
onto a ripe persimmon
the seeds can be seen

Hasegawa Kai, trans. Tanaka Kimiyo and David
Burleigh, “The Haiku of Hasegawa Kai”, *Modern Haiku*
42:3 (Autumn 2011)

Late Autumn

Against the white clay wall
Ripened persimmons
Reflect the remaining light of sunset.

Shinko Fushimi, in Noriko Mizusaki and Mayumi Sako,
eds., *For a Beautiful Planet: Voices from Contemporary Sixteen
Poets of Japan* (2009). [Published here in English only.]

吊鐘のなかの月日も柿の秋
tsurigane no naka no tsukihi mo kaki no aki

months and days
inside the temple bell
persimmon autumn

Iida Ryūta, trans. Fay Aoyagi, *Blue Willow Haiku World*
blog, October 5, 2009

柿食うて暗きもの身にたるむかな
kaki kuute kuraki mono mi ni tarumu kana

Eating a persimmon
darkness builds inside me

Ōno Rinka, in Modern Haiku Association, *Japanese*
Haiku 2001

逢えぬ夜の熟柿を吸う冷たさよ
aenu yoru no jukushi o suu tsumeta-sa yo

Oh coldness sucking the ripe persimmons out of the night
we cannot meet

Ginema, from the series “The Night-Crying Stones,”
trans. Eric Selland, in *Roadrunner* 11:3 (October
2011). Translator’s note: “ripe persimmons” means
waiting it out or biding one’s time.

war news . . .
an old peasant talks to
the persimmon tree

Marili Deandrea, *The Heron’s Nest* 6:10 (November
2004)

子規の夭折ときには羨し柿の蒂
Shiki no yōsetsu toki ni wa tomoshi kaki no heta

Sometimes I envy
Shiki's early passing—
persimmon calyx

Itami Mikihiko, Bruce Ross et al., eds.,
A Vast Sky (2015)

my first lover
now follows Buddha . . .
dried persimmons

Lynn Edge, *Modern Haiku* 46:2 (Summer 2015)

another exception
to the rule
dried persimmons

Angela Terry, *The Heron's Nest* 16:2 (June 2014)

using chemistry after all this time dried persimmon

Beverly Acuff Momoi, *Acorn* 33 (Fall 2014)

In the cubicles
the kafkaesque
of a persimmon

Paul Pfleuger, Jr., *Roadrunner* IX:2 (May 2009)

ジミ・ヘンドリクス干柿知らずに死す
Jimi Hendorikusu hoshigaki shirazuni shisu

Jimi Hendrix
he died without
tasting a dried persimmon

Noguchi Ruri, *Spica Haiku Web Magazine*, September
1, 2013; trans. Fay Aoyagi, *Blue Willow Haiku World*
blog, October 24, 2014

And, finally, in addition their beneficial vitamins and minerals, perhaps persimmons have laxative benefits:

雪隠の神はまる貌柿の秋
setchin no kami wa maru kao kaki no aki

God of the toilet
 with a round face—
 autumn persimmon

Miyasaka Shizuo, in Modern Haiku Association,
Japanese Haiku 2001. Maru is a type of persimmon.

Notes:

- 1 “A Field Guide to North American Haiku” is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-*saijiki*, a selection of the best English-language haiku arranged by topic and illustrating what it is about a given topic that attracts poets to write. When complete, the Field Guide project will comprise multiple thick volumes keyed to the several topics in traditional Japanese *saijiki* (haiku almanac) and Western counterparts, notably William J. Higginson’s *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* (1996). These topics are: Season, Sky & Elements, Landscape, Plants, Animals, Human Affairs, and Observances. The haiku are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing almost 475,000 haiku. “Persimmons” presents haiku selected from 724 haiku indexed under PLANTS: persimmon: 346 haiku originally written in English, 372 translations from Japanese, and 6 translations from other languages. Publishing these miniature topical haiku anthologies is an experiment to test the feasibility of the larger Field Guide project. Critique and suggestions, supportive or critical, are warmly invited; please comment by e-mail to cptrumbull@comcast.net.
- 2 Some fine articles about persimmons worldwide are Georgia Freedman, “Beyond Fuyus: The World of Persimmon Varieties,” *Serious Eats* website: <https://www.serious eats.com/2020/10/persimmons>.

html; Rich Zimmerman, “Persimmons, A Colorful Fruit of the Late Autumn,” *Under the Solano Sun* website: <https://ucanr.edu/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=11876>; and “Persimmon,” *Wikipedia*: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persimmon>.

- 3 Higginson, loc. cit.
- 4 Charles Trumbull, “Rakushisha,” *Haikupedia* (posted April 25, 2021): <https://haikupedia.org/article-haikupedia/rakushisha-2/>
- 5 This haiku was printed incorrectly by the *Mainichi Daily News*. Bruce Ross approved this version.
- 6 <https://www.kakinet.com/cms/>

Charles Trumbull is a past president of the Haiku Society of America and recipient of its Sora Award. He edited Modern Haiku (2006 to 2013), and was Honorary Curator of the American Haiku Archives in 2013. A haiku chapbook was published in 2011, and his book of New Mexico haiku, A Five-Balloon Morning, in June 2013. A History of Modern Haiku followed in 2019. Trumbull helped organize the Chi-ku haiku group in Chicago and the Santa Fe Haiku Study Group; the biennial Midwest—Cradle of American Haiku conferences, and two Haiku North America conferences (1999 and 2017; and two international conferences in Kraków, Poland (2003 and 2015). For more than 30 years he has been collecting haiku for his electronic Haiku Database, which currently contains almost a half million entries. His latest project is Haikupedia, an online encyclopedia of all things haiku (www.haikupedia.org).