

Good morning. Thank you to the members of the committee for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Seth Shames, and along with my wife, Sophie Kasimow, I own and manage Preston's Orchard, a two-acre persimmon orchard in Owings, in Calvert County.

Our persimmons have been sold at many Maryland farmers markets, grocery stores, and have been processed to make Kombucha, cider and brandy. They look a little bit like an orange tomato or a miniature pumpkin and they are sweet and crunchy when ripe. They are a gorgeous, delicious, and very healthy fruit.

Our persimmon trees were planted about 30 years ago by a horticulturalist at the University of Maryland named Bill Preston. We met Bill at our local farmers market in Takoma Park, and one thing led to another and a few years later we were running the orchard!

From a commercial perspective our persimmons have the benefit of being non-astringent, which means you can eat them when they are still hard, although they get sweeter as they soften. The native variety of persimmon, often called the 'American Persimmon', is typically quite small and astringent, about the size of a golfball, and need to be soft before they can be enjoyed. The American persimmon plays a very important role in Maryland's history, ecology and culture and our trees are grafted onto American persimmon rootstock to help them survive the Maryland winters.

Bill was one of a small group of people who should be credited for bringing Asian varieties of persimmons to this region of the United States. He lived his whole life in Maryland and became one of the nation's leading persimmon experts. He published a book called 'When Persimmon Was King' that describes the persimmon trees, fruit and production practices that his mentors encountered on their collecting trips to Asia. Bill managed a test plot in Maryland where he tested the taste, texture, size, and hardiness of dozens of different varieties to see which variety would fare best in Southern Maryland. He selected the very top performing variety and planted over 70 trees on 2 acres on what was then his family's 50 acre tobacco farm.

The result was a very unique, successful, and beautiful orchard that has brought deliciousness and joy to thousands of Marylanders over the years. I can attest that the fruit has devoted fans throughout the state. We have people who drive 2 hours to our house to buy a box every fall. We get requests from all over the country, particularly the mid-Atlantic region, for scionwood that would allow other farmers to graft this variety and begin growing persimmons of their own. There's far more interest than we can meet.

Bill was a kind of "Johnny Persimmon Seed," and one of the goals of his work was to spread the word that persimmons can be a successful crop in Maryland. Sadly, Bill died in 2019 about a year after we took over the orchard.

I know that he would be absolutely thrilled to have persimmon recognized as the state fruit of Maryland. This would be a beautiful way to honor Bill, and his research colleagues, while signaling an optimistic vision of a very bright future for persimmons in Maryland.

Thank you for the time, and I would love to invite you all out to pick persimmons this Fall!