

## Pecans for the holidays



By Ellie Topp

Pecans are high on the list of popular nuts, especially during the holiday season. Originating in central and eastern North America and the river valleys of Mexico, wild pecans were widely used by native peoples long before the European settlers arrived. The name Native Americans gave to this nut, a word of Algonquin origin used to describe “all nuts requiring a stone to crack,” has endured to this day.

The rich buttery flavour of pecans comes from a fat content of nearly seventy percent, the highest of all nuts. This fat is a major reason why early generations of Native American relied upon them heavily as a sustaining food source. The good news is that most of this fat is unsaturated which is important for a healthy diet. Pecans also bring beneficial antioxidants and other nutrients along with the calories. So enjoy, but watch the amount – a quarter cup packs almost 200 calories.

While pecans are available year round, they are generally at their peak in the fall just after harvesting. Pecans can turn rancid more quickly than do other nuts that have a lower oil content. So, while bulk bins of shelled pecans may have a lower price, for the best flavour stick with those that are in sealed packages or tins with expiration dates. I find it best to store the nuts in the freezer either in the original bag or a tight-fitting container until they are needed. One pound of shelled pecans equals about 4 cups of pecan halves.

Pecans are wonderful in a variety of recipes, from traditional pecan pie to nut breads. A few toasted nuts add elegance to a green salad, or try them sprinkled over cooked vegetables. Toasting is easy – simply put a few nuts in a small dry skillet and heat over medium heat, stirring frequently. But watch them closely as they burn easily.

Holiday time is the perfect time to indulge in these delicious treats.

Pralines are a traditional favourite in New Orleans where there are about as many versions as there are cooks. I tried six different sugar-butter-milk combinations and found this one to be the best.

It is an easy recipe but watch the temperature carefully and spoon the pralines out quickly before the candy becomes completely crystalline.

They should spread out to form a thin patty. The Spiced Candied Pecans are quick to make in the microwave and there is no need to measure the temperature. Both these candies make welcome gifts wrapped in small bundles of cellophane tied with a bit of ribbon. Happy holidays!

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### **Spiced Candied Pecans**

1/3 cup sugar  
2 tbsp water  
1 tsp ground cinnamon  
dash ground cloves  
dash ground allspice  
1/2 tsp vanilla  
1 cup pecan halves

1. Line a baking sheet with greased foil or parchment paper. Set aside.

In a 4-cup glass measure, combine sugar, water, cinnamon, cloves and allspice. Microwave on 100% power (High) for 1 1/2 minutes, stirring once. Stir in vanilla.

2. Mix in nuts and microwave on 100% power for 3 to 3 1/2 minutes or until mixture becomes thick and syrupy. Spread out nuts on foil and break apart with a fork.

Makes 1 cup.

### **New Orleans Pralines**

3/4 cup pecan halves  
3/4 cup granulated sugar  
1/4 cup brown sugar  
1/2 cup milk  
1 tbsp butter  
1 tsp vanilla

1. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper and spray lightly with oil.

2. In a large skillet, heat pecans over medium heat until slightly toasted.

Set aside.

3. In a medium saucepan, combine granulated sugar, brown sugar, milk and butter. Bring to a boil and using a candy thermometer simmer gently until temperature reaches 240°F. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla and pecans. Beat with a wooden spoon just until mixture becomes slightly thickened, about 1 minute. Drop quickly by spoonfulls onto baking sheet and let cool. Store in an air-tight container.

Makes about 12.

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