



Regional Timing and Seasonal Orchard Tasks

Overview

Managing a pecan tree or a small orchard requires attention throughout the year, but not every task needs to be done with commercial precision. In home settings, success comes from understanding the seasonal rhythm of the tree, knowing what matters most at each stage and adjusting based on your region, weather and tree age.

This publication provides a practical, season-by-season guide to caring for pecan trees in Louisiana. It includes key tasks for both young and mature trees, tips for adjusting based on north or south Louisiana conditions and a flexible checklist to help you stay on track. Whether you're planting your first tree or managing a legacy orchard, this publication will help you plan ahead, prioritize and respond to what your trees need most.

This publication will cover:

- 1. Understanding Louisiana's Pecan Regions:** Dividing the state into north and south Louisiana, how climate and disease pressure vary by region and why timing matters for orchard tasks.
- 2. Seasonal Overview of Orchard Activities:** Key tasks by season (winter, spring, summer, fall), how tree age and cultivar affect timing and adjusting for weather and site conditions.
 - Winter (December to February): Dormant pruning and structural training, soil testing and lime applications, planning new plantings and sourcing grafted trees, and cleaning up fallen debris to reduce disease pressure.
 - Spring (March to May): Budbreak and early shoot growth; fertilizing young and mature trees; monitoring for phylloxera, aphids and early scab; irrigation setup and weed control.
 - Summer (June to August): Nut sizing and kernel fill; supplemental irrigation during dry spells; monitoring for stink bugs, aphids and mites; foliar nutrient sampling (mid-July); and managing alternate bearing and crop load.
 - Fall (September to November): Shuck split and nut drop, harvesting and drying pecans, evaluating tree performance and pest pressure, and planning for renovation or replacement.
 - Annual Checklist for Home Pecan Orchards: A season-by-season guide to help homeowners stay on track with orchard care.
- 3. Regional Timing Adjustments:** Earlier budbreak and harvest in south Louisiana, later pruning and

fertilization in north Louisiana, and adjusting spray windows and scouting schedules.

4. **Annual Maintenance Checklist:** Summary table of tasks by season and tree age, highlighting low-input priorities for homeowners, and notes on flexibility and weather-based adjustments.
5. **What If I'm Behind?** Reassurance that trees are forgiving and most tasks have flexible windows, common scenarios and how to catch up (e.g., missed fertilization, pruning, irrigation), prioritizing when short on time and using this year's experience to improve next season.

1. Understanding Louisiana's Pecan Regions

Louisiana's climate varies significantly from north to south, and that variation affects everything from budbreak to harvest timing. For simplicity, this guide divides the state into two broad regions:

- **North Louisiana:** Alexandria and areas north
- **South Louisiana:** South of Alexandria

Why This Matters

- **Budbreak and bloom** occur earlier in the south, which means tasks like pruning, fertilization and pest monitoring need to happen sooner.
- **Disease pressure**, especially from pecan scab, tends to be higher in south Louisiana due to greater humidity and rainfall.
- **Harvest timing** also shifts by region, with southern orchards often ready to harvest two to three weeks earlier than northern ones.
- **Cultivar performance** can vary dramatically by region. Some cultivars that thrive in north Louisiana may struggle with scab in the south, while others may be too freeze-sensitive for northern sites.
- **Soil and rainfall patterns** also differ. South Louisiana tends to receive more rainfall and has heavier soils in many areas, which can increase disease pressure and limit drainage. North Louisiana often has better natural airflow and lighter soils, but is more prone to late spring freezes and more likely to experience drought stress during kernel fill in late summer.

Understanding your region helps you time orchard tasks more effectively, choose cultivars that are better suited to your local conditions and anticipate seasonal challenges before they affect your trees.

2. Seasonal Overview of Orchard Activities

Pecan trees follow a predictable seasonal rhythm, but the timing and intensity of orchard tasks can vary depending on your location, tree age and management goals. This publication provides a high-level overview of what to expect in each season and how to adjust based on your orchard's needs.

Key Tasks by Season

- **Winter (December to February):** Dormant pruning, soil testing, planting and orchard cleanup
- **Spring (March to May):** Budbreak, fertilization, early pest and disease monitoring, and weed control
- **Summer (June to August):** Nut sizing, kernel fill, irrigation, foliar sampling and pest management
- **Fall (September to November):** Shuck split, harvest, tree evaluation and planning for renovation or replacement

How Tree Age and Cultivar Affect Timing

- **Young trees** require more attention to structural training, weed control and establishment-phase fertility.
- **Mature trees** demand more focus on crop load management, irrigation during kernel fill and nutrient balance.
- **Cultivar differences**, especially in scab resistance and bloom timing, can shift the urgency or frequency of certain tasks. For example, early-bearing cultivars may require earlier harvest prep, while scab-susceptible cultivars may need more frequent monitoring during wet springs.

Adjusting for Weather and Site Conditions

- **Wet springs** may delay pruning or fertilization and increase disease pressure.
- **Dry summers**, especially in north Louisiana, may require supplemental irrigation to avoid kernel shrivel.
- **High water tables** or poorly drained soils may limit root development and delay early-season growth.
- **Late freezes** in north Louisiana can damage early-blooming cultivars and delay budbreak.

The following seasonal publications will walk through each part of the year in more detail, with practical guidance for both young and mature trees.

Winter (December to February)

Winter is a time of rest for pecan trees but not for orchard planning. This is the best season for structural pruning, soil testing and preparing for the year ahead. Cold weather slows pest and disease activity, making it a good time to clean up debris and assess tree health without the pressure of in-season growth.

Dormant pruning and structural training:

- Prune young trees to maintain a strong central leader and develop scaffold branches.
- Remove dead, damaged or poorly placed limbs on mature trees.
- Thin overcrowded trees if needed to improve airflow and light penetration.
- Avoid overpruning. Limit removal to no more than 25% of the canopy in a single year.

Soil testing and lime applications:

- Collect soil samples for pH and nutrient analysis before spring growth begins.
- Apply lime, phosphorus, magnesium and zinc based on soil test results.
- Lime should be applied several months before budbreak to allow time for pH adjustment.

Planning new plantings and sourcing grafted trees:

- Order grafted trees early. Nurseries often sell out of preferred cultivars by late winter.
- Prepare planting sites by checking drainage, spacing and soil depth.
- If planting bare-root trees, aim for late winter (January to February) while trees are still dormant.

Cleaning up fallen debris to reduce disease pressure:

- Remove fallen limbs, shucks and leaves from under trees to reduce overwintering inoculum for pecan scab and other diseases.
- Clean up old nuts to reduce carryover of pecan weevil and other pests.

Other winter tasks:

- Service and repair orchard equipment before spring.
- Collect and store graftwood if you plan to graft in spring.
- Dig and transplant nursery trees if needed.

Spring (March to May)

Spring marks the beginning of active growth in pecan trees. As buds swell and shoots emerge, trees shift from dormancy into a period of rapid development. This is a critical window for fertilization, pest and disease monitoring, and early-season weed control. Timely action in spring sets the stage for healthy canopy growth, successful pollination and strong nut development later in the year.

Budbreak and early shoot growth:

- Monitor trees closely for signs of budbreak, which typically begins in **early to mid-March in south Louisiana** and **late March in the north**.
- Early shoot growth supports flower development and sets the stage for nut production.
- Late freezes in north Louisiana can damage emerging shoots, especially in early-blooming cultivars.

Fertilizing young and mature trees:

- Apply nitrogen and other nutrients based on **tree age, soil test results** and **foliar history**.
- Young trees (Years 2 to 5) typically receive split applications of a balanced fertilizer (e.g., 10-10-10) in **March, May and June**.
- Mature trees should be fertilized in **March**, with rates adjusted based on shoot growth, leaf color and crop load expectations.
- Avoid fertilizing when soils are saturated. Wait until trees are actively growing and the ground is workable.

Monitoring for phylloxera, aphids and early scab:

- Begin **scouting for phylloxera** at budbreak, especially in trees with a history of infestation. Treat early if needed.
- Watch for **yellow aphids and black aphids** as foliage expands.
- **Pecan scab** infections begin early in the season, especially in wet springs. If spraying is feasible, begin fungicide applications at budbreak for susceptible cultivars.

Irrigation setup and weed control:

- Ensure irrigation systems are functional before hot weather arrives.
- Begin **weed control** around young trees to reduce competition for water and nutrients.
- In orchards with clover, delay mowing to allow reseeding.

Summer (June to August)

Summer is a critical period for pecan development. As nuts begin to size and fill, trees require consistent moisture, balanced nutrition and protection from pests. This is also the season when alternate bearing tendencies become more visible, and when drought stress can cause long-term impacts on nut quality, especially in north Louisiana.

Nut sizing and kernel fill:

- Nut sizing begins in **June**, followed by **kernel fill in August and early September**.
- This is the most water-sensitive stage of the season. Drought stress during kernel fill is a leading cause of shriveled or poorly filled nuts.
- Monitor trees for signs of stress, especially in sandy soils or during dry spells.

Supplemental irrigation during dry spells:

- Maintain consistent soil moisture, especially from **mid-August through kernel fill**.
- Use mulch to conserve moisture and reduce surface evaporation.
- In north Louisiana, late-summer drought is common. Deep watering every seven to 10 days may be necessary for young or shallow-rooted trees.

Monitoring for stink bugs, aphids and mites:

- **Yellow aphids, black aphids** and **mites** often increase in hot, dry weather.
- **Stink bugs** and **leaf-footed bugs** may feed on developing nuts, causing black spots or kernel damage.
- Monitor foliage for honeydew, sooty mold or leaf drop — signs of aphid pressure.
- Treat only if pest populations exceed thresholds and trees are small enough to spray effectively.

Foliar nutrient sampling (Mid-July):

- Collect leaf samples between **July 7 and Aug. 7** to assess nutrient status.
- Sample from sun-exposed shoots on the current season's growth.
- Use results to adjust fall and spring fertilization plans.

Note on split fertilizer applications:

- If foliar sampling showed low nitrogen or potassium, consider applying a **second split of fertilizer in late summer or early fall**, especially in “on” years with heavy crop loads.
- Avoid applying nitrogen too late in the season, as it may delay dormancy or reduce cold hardiness.

Fall (September to November)

Fall is harvest season, but it's also a time for evaluation, cleanup and planning. As nuts mature and drop, timely harvest and post-harvest care are essential for preserving quality. This is also the season to assess tree performance, identify problems and prepare for renovation or replacement if needed.

Shuck split and nut drop:

- Monitor trees for **shuck split**, which signals that nuts are nearing maturity.
- In **south Louisiana**, harvest may begin as early as mid-September; in the north, it often starts in early to mid-October.
- Collect nuts promptly after drop to avoid losses from wildlife, mold or sprouting.
- Avoid letting nuts sit on wet ground for extended periods. Quality declines quickly.

Harvesting and drying pecans:

- Shake or hand-pick nuts from the ground daily during peak drop.
- Dry nuts to below **6% moisture** for safe storage. Use fans or low-heat dryers if needed.
- Store in-shell pecans in a cool, dry place. For long-term storage, freeze shelled kernels.

Evaluating tree performance and pest pressure:

- Take note of:
 - ▶ Kernel fill and nut quality
 - ▶ Leaf retention and defoliation
 - ▶ Pest or disease symptoms
 - ▶ Yield consistency compared to previous years
- **Keep records:** Jot down observations on nut quality, pest pressure and leaf retention to guide next year's fertilization and pruning decisions.

Planning for renovation or replacement:

- Identify trees with poor structure, low productivity or chronic disease issues.
- Consider **topworking**, **removal** or **replacement** during the dormant season.
- Fall is also a good time to prepare planting sites for new trees. Test soil, apply lime and improve drainage if needed.

Annual Checklist for Home Pecan Orchards

Winter (December to February)

- Prune young trees for structure.
- Prune mature trees for canopy balance.
- Collect soil samples for testing.
- Apply lime and dormant nutrients (based on soil test).
- Clean up fallen leaves, shucks and limbs.
- Plan new plantings or tree replacements.

Spring (March to May)

- Apply first fertilizer to mature trees (March).
- Begin weed control around trunks.
- Start foliar zinc and boron sprays (April to May).
- Monitor for phylloxera and nut casebearer.
- Set up irrigation system if needed.
- Begin training young trees (two-foot rule, stalked bud removal).

Summer (June to August)

- Fertilize young trees (June).
- Continue foliar sprays if needed.
- Collect leaf samples for nutrient analysis (mid-July).
- Maintain irrigation, especially during kernel fill (August to September).
- Monitor for aphids, caterpillars and weevils.
- Remove suckers and water sprouts.

Fall (September to November)

- Harvest nuts. Timing varies by cultivar and region.
- Begin orchard sanitation (remove shucks, leaves).
- Evaluate tree performance and note problem areas.
- Apply fall nutrients (e.g., boron, zinc, lime) if needed.
- Plan pruning and renovation for winter.

3. Regional Timing Adjustments

While pecan trees across Louisiana follow the same general seasonal cycle, the timing of key orchard tasks can vary significantly depending on your location. Understanding these regional differences, especially between north and south Louisiana, can help you better align your management practices with your trees' actual growth stages.

Earlier Budbreak and Harvest in South Louisiana

- In south Louisiana, **budbreak often begins in early to mid-March**, with harvest starting as early as **mid-September**.
- This means tasks like **pruning, fertilization, pest monitoring and irrigation setup** need to happen earlier in the season.
- Foliar sampling and kernel fill also occur earlier, so **mid-July** is often the best window for leaf analysis.

Later Pruning and Fertilization in North Louisiana

- In north Louisiana, **budbreak is typically delayed by one to three weeks**, depending on the year.
- **Pruning and fertilization** can be pushed slightly later but still need to be completed before active growth begins.
- **Late spring freezes** are more common in the north, so early-blooming cultivars may be at greater risk.

Adjusting Spray Windows and Scouting Schedules

- Pest and disease pressure often follows the same seasonal pattern statewide, but **scouting and treatment windows shift** with regional growth stages.
- For example:
 - **Phylloxera sprays** should be timed to budbreak, which occurs earlier in the south.
 - **Pecan weevil emergence** may occur slightly earlier in southern parishes.
 - **Scab pressure** tends to be higher and more prolonged in south Louisiana due to humidity and rainfall.

Tip for Homeowners

If you're unsure when to begin a task, observe your trees closely and adjust based on **bud development, shoot growth and local weather**. Regional calendars are helpful, but your trees will tell you what they need.

4. Annual Maintenance Checklist

This publication provides a quick-reference summary of key orchard tasks by season and tree age. It’s designed to help homeowners stay organized, prioritize care, and adjust based on weather and tree performance. While exact timing may vary by region, this checklist offers a flexible framework for managing pecan trees throughout the year.

Annual orchard tasks by season.

Season	Young Trees (Years 1-5)	Mature Trees (Bearing Age)
Winter (December to February)	Prune for structure; soil test; apply lime and nutrients; plan new plantings	Prune for canopy balance; soil test; apply lime and nutrients; clean up debris
Spring (March to May)	Begin fertilization; weed control; monitor for phylloxera; check irrigation setup	Fertilize based on growth; scout for aphids and scab; begin fungicide sprays if needed
Summer (June to August)	Irrigate during dry spells; foliar sampling (mid-July); monitor for pests; mulch and weed control	Irrigate during kernel fill; foliar sampling; scout for stink bugs, aphids, mites; manage crop load
Fall (September to November)	Evaluate growth; plan for next year; prepare planting sites	Harvest; dry and store nuts; evaluate tree performance; plan renovation or replacement

Low-Input Priorities for Homeowners

- Choose scab-resistant cultivars to reduce spray needs.
- Use mulch to conserve moisture and suppress weeds in young trees.
- Focus on irrigation during kernel fill (August to September).
- Fertilize based on soil and foliar tests — not just calendar dates.
- Prune gradually to maintain structure and airflow.

Flexibility and Weather-Based Adjustments

- Most tasks have a flexible window. Adjust based on tree growth and soil conditions.
- Delay fertilization if soils are saturated.
- Shift pruning and scouting based on budbreak timing.
- Use your observations and records to guide decisions more than rigid dates.

5. What If I'm Behind?

Even in well-managed home orchards, it's common to fall behind on seasonal tasks. Weather delays, busy schedules and unexpected setbacks can all interfere with orchard care. Fortunately, pecan trees are resilient, and most tasks have a flexible window.

Catching Up on Missed Tasks

- **Spring fertilization missed?** Apply a light dose in early summer, especially if shoot growth is weak or leaf color is pale.
- **Winter pruning skipped?** Light corrective pruning can still be done in early spring before budbreak. Avoid heavy cuts once growth begins.
- **Foliar sampling forgotten?** Watch for visual nutrient symptoms (e.g., pale leaves, poor kernel fill) and plan to sample next July.
- **Irrigation missed during kernel fill?** Expect some shriveled or poorly filled nuts. Focus on improving water access and mulching before next season.

Prioritizing When Time Is Limited

If you're behind and can't do everything, focus on tasks with the greatest long-term impact:

- **Watering during kernel fill (August to September):** This is the most critical window for nut quality. Even a few deep soakings can make a difference.
- **Structural pruning in the first three to five years:** Early training shapes the tree for decades. Remove poor forks, maintain a central leader and raise the canopy gradually.
- **Fertilizing based on growth and leaf color:** If trees are pale or growing poorly, a modest fertilizer application may help, even if it's late.
- **Removing suckers and dead wood:** These can be removed anytime and help redirect energy to productive growth.

Planning Ahead for Next Season

- Use this year's experience to adjust your calendar or simplify your orchard plan.
- Keep a simple orchard log or checklist to track what worked and what didn't.
- Set reminders for key tasks like foliar sampling, irrigation setup or fertilizer application.

For more information on pecan care and orchard management, see other titles in the From Soil to Shell: Louisiana Pecan Series and the Louisiana Home Orchard: Pecans publication available through the LSU AgCenter.

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P1884-C-10 (online) 6/26

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