

## NATIVES TO KNOW

### **Pawpaw** (*Asimina triloba*)

By Joyce Tuharsky

The pawpaw is a small, understory tree with large, drooping leaves, rich red-purple or maroon flowers, and the largest edible fruit indigenous to the eastern United States.



Seldom taller than 25 feet, pawpaws spread locally primarily by root suckers. The dark green, deciduous leaves grow up to 12 inches long, 1–2 inches wide, and are simple, alternate and spirally arranged. These large leaves clustered at the ends of branches give the tree an interesting tropical appearance. In autumn, the leaves turn a rusty yellow.

Pawpaw flowers bloom in early spring about the same time that new leaves emerge. The flowers are 1–2 inches across with six petals and three sepals and borne singly on stout, hairy stems. The flowers develop into large, yellowish brown berries, 2–6 inches long and weighing up to 18 ounces. The larger fruits are plump, soft and thin skinned, similar to mangos. Inside, there are 10 to 14 brown seeds in two rows embedded in soft, edible pulp. When mature, the large fruit will bend the weak branches down.



Pawpaw fruits ripen in late August to mid-September and have long been a favorite treat, which is occasionally sold at local farmers' markets. The fruit has a fragrant aroma, custardy texture, and tastes somewhat between a banana and a cantaloupe. Compared to apples or peaches, pawpaws are higher in food energy and minerals, and have double the vitamin C. They are a good source of protein, fiber, carbohydrates, and antioxidants.

Nevertheless, pawpaws have never been cultivated on a large scale, because the fruits bruise easily and ripen to fermentation soon after picked. Only frozen fruit will store or ship well. However, where pawpaws grow locally, the pulp is often used in baked desserts, ice cream, pancakes, juices and jams.

The earliest documented mention of pawpaws is in a 1541 report of the Spanish de Soto expedition who found Native Americans cultivating them east of the Mississippi River. Chilled Pawpaw fruit was a favorite dessert of George Washington. Thomas Jefferson planted pawpaws at Monticello, his home in Virginia.

In the wild, pawpaw fruits are eaten by several mammals including raccoons, foxes, opossums, squirrels and black bears. The disagreeable-smelling leaves and twigs contain natural insecticides known as acetogenins and are avoided by deer. Nevertheless, the larvae of the Zebra Swallowtail feed exclusively on the leaves and the acetogenins make this butterfly unpalatable to birds and other predators. The natural insecticides in pawpaw leaves can be used to make organic pesticides.

The cultivation of pawpaws is attracting renewed interest among organic growers as a native fruit that can be grown without pesticides. Pawpaws are also gaining in popularity among landscapers because of their distinctive growth habit, appeal of fresh fruit, and relatively low maintenance once established. Highly frost tolerant, the tree does best in deep, fertile soil that is moist, but well-drained and slightly acidic.

More information and photos available at:

- <https://herbarium.natsci.msu.edu/outreach/coloring-books/coloring-page-3/asimina-triloba/>
- <https://alumni.msu.edu/stay-informed/alumni-stories/msu-and-the-pawpaw-americas-best-tasting-fruit>
- <https://www.kysu.edu/academics/college-acs/school-of-ace/pawpaw/index.php>