

Rediscovering the pawpaw patch

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*Pickin' up pawpaws,
puttin' 'em in a basket.*

*Pickin' up pawpaws,
puttin' 'em in a basket.*

*Way down yonder in
the pawpaw patch.*

As children, we danced in a circle while singing this traditional American folk song and pretending to pick up fruit from the ground. Most of us, though, had no idea what a pawpaw was, and had certainly never seen or tasted one. That hasn't always been so in this part of the country.

You probably didn't know that pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) is the largest native fruit in North America. It turns out to be one that most people have never tasted, maybe never heard of, and that's a shame. Native Americans ate pawpaws and used the tree's fiber for cordage, rope and fabric. For the early colonists, pawpaw was an important food in late summer. George Washington favored pawpaws for dessert, Thomas Jefferson grew them at Monticello, and Lewis and Clark praised the fruit in their journals.

How did Americans forget about this tasty fruit that grows wild in 26 states in the east and mid-west? When we stopped going to



Photo by Andrea Perkins

Pawpaws generally grow in clusters of two or three. These are not quite ripe. When ready to eat, they fall to the ground.

the woods for food, the pawpaw was left behind. The aromatic but fragile fruit has a short shelf life, which is why you won't find them in your average grocery store. They will keep a week or so in the refrigerator.

The potato-sized fruit turns from green, to yellow, then black as they ripen in the fall. Pawpaws are rich in minerals and Vitamin C. The yellow to orange flesh may be eaten raw, made into ice cream, substituted for bananas in baking, or used as a custard pie filling. The pulp can be frozen. Most people say it tastes like a blend of banana and mango. The best thing you can do with a ripe pawpaw is slice it in half and scoop it out with a spoon or just slurp it from the peel, spitting out the large seeds, which can be toxic if eaten. It's like custard in a cup, with a creamy texture and dreamy taste.

How do we find them



Photo by Andrea Perkins

Jim Latimer eats his pawpaws by breaking them in half and slurping up the soft, sweet flesh. Jim planted six saplings on the bank above his Herrington Lake home five years ago and they began producing fruit the second year.

if we're not foragers? If you're lucky, you may spot some in September at a farmers market or at Good Foods Co-op in Lexington, where they are quickly snatched up by eager fans. With the local foods movement and a return to regional cuisine, interest is growing in pawpaws. A number of universities are conducting field tests on various varieties hoping to make them a marketable cash crop. Kentucky State University in Frankfort has the largest pawpaw research program in the country.

For gardeners, the 15 to 20 foot trees make an intriguing addition to the landscape. The dropped fruit is messy if left on the ground, so they are best planted away from the house. They prefer to begin life as understory saplings and are quite happy in light shade, but they produce the most fruit in sun. Pawpaws are not self-fertile, which means different varieties must be planted



Photo by Andrea Perkins

Pawpaw trees grow quickly to 12 to 20 feet tall and make nice groves with slender trunks. The large, deep green leaves have a tropical appearance and turn yellow in autumn.

together to ensure fruit. In early spring, their purplish-brown flowers bloom on the bare branches. The lush, tropical-looking foliage is rich green all summer and turns buttery yellow in the fall. Pawpaws are the only host plant for the beautiful zebra swallowtail butterfly, which should interest those who garden for pollinators. If you see a zebra striped swallowtail, you can be sure pawpaws are somewhere nearby.

Members of the Garden Club of Danville saw an experimental pawpaw orchard last month at the University of Kentucky's organic farm in Lexington. Dr. Mark Williams, director of the sustainable agriculture program, gave us each a spoon to taste the rich, custardy flesh. I, for one, am convinced that this delicious fruit has a fu-



Photo by Betty Hall Photography

The small, purplish-brown flowers bloom on bare branches in early spring and have a faintly unpleasant odor which attracts pollinators.

ture in our diets and in our landscapes. In fact, I plan to plant my own little pawpaw patch in my backyard. The trees are pretty, and eating local doesn't get any closer than home.

Phone calls to area nurseries revealed that the trees sell out quickly,

so call first if you want to plant some. At Springhouse Gardens outside Nicholasville you can get on a waiting list by emailing goldensolidago@hotmail.com. For information about the Garden Club of Danville, see www.gardenclubof-danville.org.



Photo by Betty Hall Photography

Pawpaws are the only host plant for the beautiful zebra swallowtail butterfly. Their leaves contain a chemical which repels most other insects and mammals.