

PAWPAW



Pawpaws (*Asimina triloba*) are one of the most unique and delicious fruits that can be grown in a backyard orchard. Although the trees are native to the Eastern US, they're not well-known because their fruit is too perishable to be sold on grocery store shelves. In nature, pawpaws grow in river floodplains and shady, rich bottomlands, forming dense groves. They spend many years as an understory species before reaching a break in the canopy that provides sunnier conditions. Only then can they begin producing their tasty fruit. Mimicking these conditions can help us grow healthy, abundant pawpaws.

ENJOYING THE FRUIT

Pawpaws are typically eaten fresh. This tropical-tasting fruit is often described as banana custard with a hint of mango. Nuances come with the different varieties and the different stages of ripeness.

You can use a pawpaw much as you would use a banana. Try using it as a replacement in a banana bread recipe or in a fruit smoothie.

For longer-term storage, you can freeze the fruit and make ice cream out of it. Except for use in baking, cooking is not recommended, as the flavor would be diminished.

Pawpaws are a good source of vitamin C and other nutrients, including manganese.



CHOOSING A SITE

Rich, deep, well-drained soil with a pH of 5.5–7 is ideal. To simulate the understory conditions needed to establish a pawpaw, you could plant on the north side of a fence, where the pawpaw will be shaded while it's young but receive full sunlight as it matures and grows above the fence line.

Another option is to plant quick-growing annual legumes on the south side of the pawpaw. A simple bean or pea trellised over the top of the young tree will provide quick shade and nitrogen fixation (as well as a bean or pea crop).

PLANTING

This tree can be difficult to transplant because it doesn't like its deep root system to be disturbed or broken. In the spring just after bud break is the best time to transplant a potted tree from the nursery. Starting with bare-root plants is usually not successful. When planting, be careful not to disturb the roots. Add some leaf litter to encourage mycorrhizal activity and then water well.

Pawpaws can be spaced relatively close together, as close as 5 feet. This is the best way to mirror the dense groves that they form in the wild. It's believed that pawpaws actively graft their roots together and share nutrients. Space no more than 10 feet apart, and plant at least three varieties for successful cross-pollination.

TAKING CARE: WATERING, FEEDING, PRUNING

Keep very well watered for the first few years after planting. Pollination can be the major limiting factor to getting an abundance of fruit. Because the flowers are *protogynous* (the female organ, the stigma, ripens before the pollen and

is therefore not receptive when the pollen is ripe), the flower can't pollinate itself. The entire tree is also usually self-incompatible, meaning that pollen from one flower on the tree will not pollinate the stigma of other flowers on the same tree.

Therefore, we suggest always planting several varieties. The more trees you have, the more successful your pollination will be. Two varieties is the absolute minimum you can plant to get fruit, but more fruit is produced with three or more varieties.

The flowers, which are a deep and beautiful reddish-purple, smell a bit like rotting flesh because they are pollinated by various species of flies and beetles. One strategy for attracting these pollinators is to put roadkill or rotting meat near your pawpaws when they are flowering to attract their natural pollinators. Alternatively, you can pollinate by hand, which we have found to be nearly 100% successful. The [@GrowWhereYouArePlanted](#) video channel on YouTube has a great video about pollinating by hand.

After the tree starts setting fruit, make sure that no single branch is too loaded up with pawpaws, or the weight may cause breakage or result in smaller fruits.

AVOIDING PESTS AND DISEASE

In general, pawpaws are one of the most disease- and pest-resistant fruit trees that you can grow. If you have deer problems, these trees are a good choice because deer typically avoid eating the leaves.

A few insect pests exist, but most are relatively minor. Larvae of the Zebra Swallowtail Butterfly (*Eurytides marcellus*) feed exclusively on young pawpaw leaves. The relationship between the Zebra Swallowtail and the pawpaw is similar to that of the Monarch butterfly and the milkweed plant. Acetogenins in the pawpaw leaves remain present in trace amounts in the Zebra Swallowtail's body for the remainder of its life, making it unpalatable to birds or other predators. The incredible beauty of the Zebra Swallowtail and the minimal damage it does to the leaves make this insect not much of a concern.

HARVESTING

Pawpaws will fall to the ground when they are fully ripe, but to avoid bruising the soft fruits, pull them gently from the tree. Like an avocado, they will yield a bit under pressure when ripe. Once picked, they are extremely perishable and will keep only a couple of days fully ripe without refrigeration.



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