

## An Overlooked Treasure?

Should we give a boost to the neglected pawpaw, *Asimina triloba*? Because we see it in our woodland areas from time to time and perhaps because it is essentially a wildling here, we pay little attention to the pawpaw. Would you believe the fine state of Ohio recently declared the pawpaw its “official state fruit”. In a recent news story I read that this neglected fruit has its own ‘Johnny Appleseed,’ a college teacher in the Midwest who surreptitiously sows pawpaw seeds hither and yon. He was quoted as saying he wished us to create more than we consume- green the world.

Native to this area, the pawpaw was carried to the Midwest by Indian tribes as they followed game westward. It is the only temperate zone member of the tropical *Annona* family. Pawpaw, sometimes written paw paw or papaw, is a small, large leaf tree, sometimes as tall as twenty feet and as wide, forming a suckering thicket or copse as an understory in the woods. However, these trees can be planted in the open in well-drained moist soil as a decorative addition to the landscape.

If you wish to transplant a seedling tree to your lawn, they have to be found very young. You can identify the pawpaw seedling by the two leaves, drooping like a hound dog’s ears, hanging at the top of the naked stem. These seedlings grow long taproots and once those taproots grab hold they will not resettle in your front lawn. All of this makes purchasing them from a specialist a fine idea. One specialist is [www.petersonpawpaws.com](http://www.petersonpawpaws.com), a nursery in West Virginia. Neal Peterson was a young geneticist in the mid-seventies when he rediscovered this delicious fruit.

Another source is Edible Landscaping Nursery in Afton, Virginia that features ‘Mango’, ‘Select’, and ‘Davis’ varieties. These choices have been selected over time for their fine fruits, but they are not self-fertile so two plants are needed for pollination. If you search, you may find newer varieties that are self-fertile. When pawpaws are planted in a lawn and you prefer a single tree rather than a small grove, the suckers can easily be controlled by mowing. Not fussy as to soil and unbothered by pests or diseases a pawpaw will begin bearing in six to eight years. The fruit ripens in late summer to fall as it turns a faint yellow green. If picked too soon they are astringent: fully ripe they are pleasantly aromatic with sweet custard-like flesh tasting similar to banana, mango, vanilla or pineapple?

As further enticement to try this delicious fruit, chilled pawpaw is said to have been George Washington’s favorite dessert. If you are wondering if this fruit is so delectable why do you not see it in stores, the answer is that it does not ship well. Scientists are working to correct that failing! At the Kentucky State University there is a twenty-year research program with the goal of developing pawpaw as a marketable commodity. Kentucky farmers need an alternative to growing tobacco.

Pawpaws’ flower in the spring and the three-part brown and violet blooms, which appear before the leaves, are pungently fragrant. If pollinated they are followed by clusters of curved banana-like fruit. That appearance has inspired common names, i.e.

poor man's banana, Kansas banana, Missouri banana. One garden book suggests that since the flowers are pollinated by the carrion-seeking blow-fly, it would help to hang scraps of old meat in mesh bags in the flowering branches- hmmm.

A further note: the leaves are aspen-yellow in the fall and the zebra swallowtail butterfly chooses this species only to hatch their young.

**A WARNING:** It is extremely important to read the label on anything you purchase to apply in, on, or around your property. The latest alarm has been attached to something as common as mulch. A product used as mulch and made from the leftover material in processing chocolate from cocoa beans is cocoa mulch sold in garden supply stores. This product may contain theobromine, the chemical present in cocoa bean shells. If theobromine is in the mulch, it may be lethal to dogs and cats. Cats are not likely to sample it but as you know, most dogs will eat anything that doesn't bite back. As you know, there is always difficulty in verifying information, but it is always wise to be cautious when untested items appear in the marketplace.

A seed story: Master Gardener Debbie Bartok-Newton is sharing this experience with Asian lily seeds: "I collected the dried seed pods and a few weeks ago I scattered the seeds on some composted potting soil in a cardboard box, watered with seaweed fertilizer (for seed germination) and covered in plastic wrap. I now have a box full of green stems in my living room sunny window and I am so excited. I'll plant the whole box in the spring but I expect it will take several years before they are blooming size." Way to go Debbie!