

Pawpaw, a hardy fruit with tropical aspirations

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Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) is a native fruit whose uniqueness and flavor accord it good commercial potential. The plant and fruit seemingly have tropical aspirations: Pawpaw is the northernmost member of the mostly tropical custard apple family and the tree looks tropical with large, lush leaves. But mostly, the tropical-ness is with the fruits, which hang in clusters, as do bananas, and appear reminiscent of mango. Inside is a creamy, white, custardy flesh tasting much like that of bananas, with additional hints of vanilla custard, pineapple, and mango. Tropical “roots” notwithstanding, pawpaw tolerates winter temperatures at least to minus 25 degrees Fahrenheit.

Being easy to grow is another plus for pawpaw as a commercial fruit. The tree requires little pruning and is relatively free from insect and disease problems. As such, pawpaw is well suited to “organic” or “sustainable” production and marketing.

Even the rose has its thorns, and pawpaw does have its quirks that need attention. A taproot makes transplanting require a bit more care than involved in transplanting. Getting plants from a specialty nursery improves results. Also, the peduncle is for a cluster of fruits, with the abscission layer where the peduncle meets the stem; a wound, therefore, is left on each fruit where it detaches from the cluster. Flowers open over a long period of time so fruits on a given tree likewise ripen over a period of time, spreading out harvest date, which can be an advantage or disadvantage. Perhaps the greatest challenge is in handling and storing the fruit, which is soft and easily bruised, and probably not suited to long-term storage.

The above challenges are less of an issue for small farms and local sales. At this scale, customers can taste the fruits, the flavor of which usually sells them right there. The long harvest period means a long period of sales. The long bloom period makes the trees less susceptible to late frost damage than most other tree fruits. In my testing, fruit can be made available though harvest and storage from about the middle of September until about the middle of November. The pulp can be extracted and frozen for long-term storage.

Okay, let’s plant pawpaws. Site requirements are similar to that of other fruits: sun and well-drained, moderately fertile soil. The fruits do need sufficient summer heat to ripen – about 160 days or 2600 growing degree-days. Although most seedling trees have at least reasonably good flavor, planting a named variety (i.e. a grafted tree) – two different ones, for cross-pollination – gives better assurances of quality as well as larger fruit and earlier production. Recommended spacing is 10 to 20 feet within the row. Trees naturally develop good form so little training is needed beyond removing crowding branches. As tree ages, periodic heading cuts stimulate growth of new wood on which fruits are borne. Pruning also thins out potential fruits, which may increase size of those that remain as well as avoid limb breakage.

Virtually no care is needed during the growing season. Trees do sucker; I go through the planting two or three times during the growing season to cut them off.

In USDA hardiness zone 5, ripening begins around the middle of September. Ripening is signaled by softening of fruits and skin color becoming speckled brown (similar to banana!).

Ripe fruits also drop. I harvest fruits from the ground. Harvesting from the ground dictates another wrinkle in pruning: Fruits that drop from too great a height get damaged upon landing, so I head trees to no higher than about 10 feet. I also mulch the ground beneath the trees with hay to soften the impact upon landing.

Harvested daily and whisked into the cooler at 39 degrees Fahrenheit, sound, dropped fruit keep well for at least two to three weeks. Dropped fruits are not all at the same stage of ripeness. Firm fruits soften and improve in flavor over time. In fact, flavor can change dramatically during softening and ripening, with people differing with their preferred stages of ripeness.

Pawpaw fruits have been very well received in test marketing via direct sales (with tasting) and restaurant sales. Depending on markets, returns have ranged from \$6 to \$12 per pound, making pawpaw a fruit with good market potential.

For more details on the history, cultivation, and varieties of pawpaw (as well other interesting and commercially viable, “uncommon,” fruits), see my book *Uncommon Fruits for Every Garden*, Timber Press, 2004.