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News Release

## **Growing Pawpaws**

Questions: I have heard the song about pawpaws but I don't know anything about them. What is a pawpaw and can they be grown in our area?

Answer:

Picking up paw-paws; put 'em in a basket.  
Picking up paw-paws; put 'em in a basket.  
Picking up paw-paws; put 'em in a basket.  
Way down yonder in the paw-paw patch.

If you are from almost anywhere in the eastern U.S. you have probably heard this song at some point in your life but few people have tried to grow this largest of the native fruits.

The earliest documentation of pawpaws (*Asimina triloba*) is in the 1541 report of the De Soto expedition, who found Native Americans cultivating it east of the Mississippi River. The Lewis and Clark Expedition depended and sometimes subsisted on pawpaws during their travels. The famed explorer, William Bartram who traveled through Alabama, collected and sent plants to England. Chilled pawpaw fruit was a favorite dessert of George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson planted them at Monticello.

The pawpaw, although still relatively unknown in its native country is slowly gaining in popularity. Researchers are studying this interesting plant and its many potential uses. It looks very much like a tropical plant and grows wild near creek banks and river bottoms in the understory of broadleaf forests all over the eastern U.S. The tree is a small normally multi-trunked plant reaching about 15 to 25 feet. The plant makes a very nice small tree with large coarse textured leaves that turn mostly bright yellow before falling off. They produce maroon, upside-down flowers up to 2 inches across. The normal bloom period consists of about 6 weeks during March to May depending on variety, latitude and climatic conditions. The blossom consists of 2 whorls of 3 petals each. Each flower contains several ovaries which explain why a single flower can produce multiple fruits much like little hands of bananas. As mentioned, the fruit is the largest edible fruit native to North America. Individual fruits weigh 5 to 16 ounces and are 3 to 6 inches in length. The larger sizes will appear plump, similar to a mango. The fruit usually has 10 to 14 seeds in two rows. The ripe fruit is soft and thin skinned and has a banana and mango flavor. The fruit ripen from late August to early October depending upon the variety.

Unfortunately, the spring freeze ruined this year's crop as it did with most other fruit crops in our area.

Pawpaws are very difficult to transplant from the wild but can be transplanted from containers or even bare root if handled and cared for properly. They prefer a well drained soil but can tolerate some periodic flooding. They are doing quite well near the bog garden in the Birmingham Botanical Garden. Pawpaws are also quite tolerant of full sun to fairly deep shade. The plant will be more heavily branched and compact in full sun and will produce more fruit. You will need to plant at least two plants for pollination purposes. You can purchase named varieties that are propagated by grafting and this is the best way to assure early and good fruit. Plants grown from seed may take eight years to produce fruit and the fruit may not be good to eat. I talked with Dale Brooks, a pawpaw producer in Morgan county and he suggested the following varieties: Mango, NC-1, Sunflower and Sweet Alice. If you are interested in the tree for strictly ornamental characteristics he suggested planting NC-1 because of the dark glossy leaves of this variety.

Research is underway to develop improved selections for both landscape and fruit productions. Interestingly, certain plant extracts are being researched for cancer therapy where it shows some promise in shrinking drug resistant tumors. Certain plant extracts have also proven effective as a natural pesticide. This last attribute may explain why it has few insect pests. How a plant with such a catchy song and so much going for it could have been overlooked for so long is a mystery. For more detailed information visit Kentucky State University and their pawpaw information website at: [www.pawpaw.kysu.edu](http://www.pawpaw.kysu.edu).

For more information about horticulture or other related topics please contact Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email [gloveta@auburn.edu](mailto:gloveta@auburn.edu).

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