

The Pawpaw: Reclaiming North America's Forgotten Fruit (published 2026-09-05)
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If you spend time hiking the riverbanks or damp woodlands of Northeast Tennessee, you have likely walked past the pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) without realizing it. Despite being the largest edible fruit native to North America, it remains largely absent from local grocery stores and commercial orchards. This isn't due to a lack of flavor. The fruit has a custardy texture and a taste often described as a mix of banana, mango, and melon. The challenge lies in its short shelf life and the specific requirements for successful cultivation in a home landscape.

A Native Alternative to Tropical Imports

The pawpaw is a member of the Annonaceae family, which is almost entirely tropical. It is the only member of this group that has adapted to the cold winters down to USDA Zone 5. Because it is a native species, it has spent thousands of years adapting to our local pests and soil conditions. Unlike apple or peach trees, which require a rigorous spray schedule to produce clean fruit in East Tennessee, the pawpaw is relatively maintenance-free.

The leaves contain natural compounds called acetogenins. These chemicals act as a powerful repellent to most insects and deer, meaning you rarely see deer or Japanese beetles defoliating a pawpaw tree. This makes it an excellent choice for gardeners who want to produce food without relying on synthetic pesticides. It also serves as the exclusive host plant for the zebra swallowtail butterfly. By planting these trees, you are providing a direct food source for their larvae.

Siting and Pollination Challenges

You cannot simply plant a single pawpaw tree and expect a harvest. The tree is self-incompatible, meaning you need at least two different varieties to achieve cross-pollination. Even with two trees, you might find that your fruit set is low. This is because pawpaws are not pollinated by bees. Instead, their dark, maroon flowers emit a faint scent of fermenting fruit that attracts carrion flies and beetles.

In a home garden, many people find success through hand-pollination. You can use a small artist's brush to collect pollen from the male-stage flowers of one tree and transfer it to the female-stage flowers of another. This simple task can significantly increase the weight of your harvest.

Location is the other hurdle. While a mature pawpaw tree can handle full sun, young saplings are highly sensitive to ultraviolet light. In the wild, they grow in the understory of larger hardwood trees. For the first two years, you must provide artificial shade or plant them in a spot that only receives morning sun. Once they reach about three feet in height, they can tolerate the full Tennessee sun and will actually produce more fruit when given more light.

Harvesting the Rewards

One reason you won't find pawpaws at the supermarket is that they ripen and soften almost immediately. Once a pawpaw falls from the tree, it only stays fresh for two or three days at room temperature. You know they are ready when they give slightly to a gentle squeeze, similar to a ripe avocado, and give off a strong, fruity aroma.

The fruit is best eaten fresh or used in recipes that do not require high heat, as cooking can turn the flavor bitter. Many local growers pulp the fruit and freeze it for use in ice creams or puddings throughout the winter. Because the seeds are large and easy to remove, processing the fruit is straightforward.

Integrating pawpaws into your yard turns a shaded corner into a productive food source. It allows you to grow a fruit that tastes tropical but belongs right here in the Appalachian foothills. By selecting native trees like these, you reduce your workload and support the local insect and bird populations that depend on them.

Resources:

“Pawpaws for Tennessee Gardens and Landscapes,”
https://solutions.tennessee.edu/?view_pub_pdf=2103

“Pawpaw Planting Guide,” <https://www.kysu.edu/academics/college-ahnr/school-of-ahn/pawpaw/pawpaw-planting-guide.php>

“Asimina triloba,” <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/asimina-triloba/>

“Virginia Tech Dendrology”
<https://dendro.cnre.vt.edu/dendrology/syllabus/factsheet.cfm?ID=155>

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