

How to grow a pawpaw tree

Question: When looking through a seed catalogue recently I came across pawpaw trees for sale. What can you tell me about them? Will they grow in our area? Can you give me some tips for growing a pawpaw tree?

Answer: The pawpaw, *Asimina triloba*, belongs to the Annonaceae or the Custard Apple family. The pawpaw is native in the temperate regions of North America and at one time grew wild over much of Indiana. In nature, it is a small understory tree. It will grow to about 10 feet tall when given sunlight and space.

The earliest documented mention of pawpaws is in the 1541 report of the Spanish deSoto Expedition, who found Native Americans cultivating it east of the Mississippi River. The tough, fibrous inner bark of the pawpaw was used by Native Americans and settlers in the Midwest for making ropes, fishing nets, mats and for stringing fish. The Lewis and Clark Expedition consumed pawpaws during their travels. Chilled pawpaw is documented as a favorite dessert of George Washington. And last but not least, Thomas Jefferson planted it at Monticello, his home in Virginia.

The pawpaw tree produces an oblong fruit that weighs 6-12 ounces. The fruit has a deep yellow, creamy-textured flesh and tastes like a cross between a banana, mango and pineapple. It contains large seeds that



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are easily removed. The fruit has a thin skin that is green when immature and turns a light yellowish color when mature.

The fruit matures over several weeks starting at the end of August and continues through September. A true indicator of when a fruit is ready to pick is that it is soft when gently squeezed. The flesh of a ripe pawpaw will be yellow, soft and smooth, resembling custard.

Pawpaw fruits must be eaten within a few weeks after harvest. Pawpaws are wonderful raw, or in a vast array of recipes from sorbets to pies. The fruit puree stores well frozen. Other methods of preservation include dehydration, production of jams or jellies, and pressure canning.

Cultivars grafted onto seedling rootstocks offer the best possibility of obtaining good fruit quality. All pawpaw trees bear flowers which are both male and female, but they do not normally self-pollinate. Two or more genotypes are required for pollination and fruit set. Some cultivars that will do well in our area are Sunflower and Mango.

Sunflower is a very reliable variety that produces some of the largest fruits of all pawpaws.



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Pawpaw fruit usually starts maturing near the end of August. An indicator of ripeness is that the fruit is soft when gently squeezed. The flesh of a ripe pawpaw will be yellow, soft and smooth, resembling custard.



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Mango is very vigorous and fast growing for a pawpaw. It is an exceptional variety that produces large fruit tasting like mangos. Selections also include Alleghe-ny, Mitchell, Potomac, Prolific, Rappahannock, Shenandoah, Taylor and Wabash.

Although the pawpaw is capable of fruiting in the shade, it performs best in an equal

balance of sun and shade. Pawpaws grow best in slightly acidic (pH 5.5 to 7.0), deep, fertile and well-drained soils. Good drainage is essential for success. Pawpaws will not survive water-logged conditions.

Grown in partial sun, the pawpaw tree develops a pyramidal shape, with dense drooping foliage down to the ground. In the shade it has a more

open branching habit. Pawpaw trees send up root sprouts and in time a single tree may form an extensive patch of genetically identical trees. They can be a source of seasonal color, because the leaves turn bright yellow in autumn and their brown, velvety flower buds open up to deep burgundy flowers from March to May.

The pawpaw tree grows in the temperate regions of USDA Hardiness Zones 5-9, and has four intriguing qualities:

- It is a hardy deciduous perennial that grows as either a tree or shrub.

- Fruit is optional because the plant does not self-pollinate.

- With or without fruit, its drooping golden leaves in fall and musky, maroon flowers in spring make for a striking and structural focal point.

- These sturdy, slow-growing trees are naturally disease and pest resistant. Even the deer avoid the leaves and branches.

Spring and fall, when the trees are dormant, are the ideal times to put your trees in the ground. Trees should be planted 15-25 feet apart to ensure adequate space for growth, but close

enough for pollination. Work the soil down about a foot until it's loose and crumbly. You'll want to make it deep enough (about as deep as the pot) so that the brittle tap root is not stressed and wide enough that the entire root system is not compressed. You can amend with coconut coir fibers or peat moss if the soil is compacted.

Remove your plant from the pot and loosen the soil and any tangled roots. Place the plant with its soil into the hole, making the top of the pot soil even with the ground soil. Tamp the soil down. Make a ridge of earth around the plant, and apply a layer of mulch to aid in moisture retention. Water thoroughly and keep the soil moist throughout the growing season.

One bite and you'll be enjoying one of America's best-kept-secret fruits — just be sure to spit out any seeds. If you would like to grow a truly unique fruit, try pawpaw.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.