

## PawPaw – An Ornamental North American Fruit

As I am now celebrating my second anniversary as the Director of the Rutgers Gardens, I have noticed a definite trend in the types of questions that I receive. Perhaps not too unexpected, food appears to be on the minds of most homeowners! More pointedly, plants which produce edible fruits and are ornamental. Apple is one of the first plants mentioned, but if they are not dedicated to sprays, the fruit may not live up to expectations. My suggestion is an interesting native plant that has fascinated me for the past 15 years – the Pawpaw.

Granted, Pawpaw is an interesting name, as is the botanical name *Asimina triloba*, both of which can serve as great conversation openers at a party! Native from Florida to New York and west to Nebraska, it is an understory tree in the wild, growing 15-20' tall. In a shaded location, the plant often loses its lower branches and becomes rather misshapen. In the sun, the plant develops a broad pyramidal habit, branched to the ground, with 6-12" lush tropical leaves delicately hanging from these branches. It is truly one of those plants that look as if it should not be growing in NJ! In spring, the cup shaped cinnamon brown flowers appear along the still leaf barren stems. To the non-enthusiast of plants, they are barely noticeable. To the plant lover, they are an element of great fascination and beauty.

During September and October, the fruit begins to ripen. The common name of Pawpaw is a derivation of papaya, which the fruit roughly resembles. *Asimina* is from *amimina*, old French for papaya! As the fruit ripens, it turns from green to a rich yellow. The shape is generally oblong, up to 6" in length and one pound in weight! The fruit has a consistency of custard with a taste resembling a banana-pear cross. Nutritionally, it is high in unsaturated fats, is richer in Potassium, Phosphates, and Magnesium than apples, peaches and grapes, and it is also a good source of vitamins A and C. Since it only has a shelf life of 1-2 weeks, it is a commodity that you will not normally find in stores, and is best eaten fresh, or worked into ice cream, sorbet, chiffon pie or combined fresh with mint! Pawpaw is best uncooked, since the compounds that provide the great flavor will quickly evaporate, rendering the fruit tasteless.

For best growth, plant in an area with full sun or light shade, in soils that drain well; standing water is deadly! Since the pollen of a plant ripens after the stigma (the female portion of the flower), the plant cannot self pollinate, necessitating at least two genetically different plants for proper fruit formation. The plants should be planted at a small size, since they have a pronounced taproot and are difficult to move large. When first planted, the provision of some shade is also beneficial for proper root development. With a native growing area spanning such a large territory and growing zones, it is best to select plants that have a more northerly provenance for consideration in NJ gardens.

Since the plants have rather ornamental foliage and habit, they can be used in a number of different manners in the landscape. They are the size of a small ornamental tree, and look great next to patios and decks. Unpicked fruit can be messy if allowed to fall, which is one liability of the plant and may be a concern around ornamental ponds and

swimming pools. The tropical foliage also provides a rich backdrop to perennials, and looks great situated behind perennial and mixed borders.

With all of these great attributes, it is obvious why I suggest the Pawpaw as a first choice to those searching for a tree of ornament and fruit. Both for its name, and its physical attributes, it is a sure conversation starter at your next party!