



Pawpaw Trees in Pittsburgh



Asimina triloba, or the pawpaw tree, is a native fruit tree once abundant in Pittsburgh's forests and river valleys. However, industrialization and urban development have greatly reduced its numbers, leaving isolated patches that struggle to reproduce naturally.

Before European settlement, pawpaw trees thrived in the rich, moist soils of Pittsburgh's river valleys and lowland forests. Indigenous peoples cultivated and consumed pawpaw fruit, spreading its seeds. However, as Pittsburgh industrialized, much of the native floodplain habitat was lost to steel mills, railroads, and urban sprawl. Pollution from heavy industry further degraded the soil and waterways, limiting the conditions pawpaws need to grow. Today, remnant populations persist but struggle to expand due to habitat fragmentation.

The pawpaw is the exclusive host plant for the zebra swallowtail butterfly (*Eurytides marcellus*), meaning its larvae can only feed on pawpaw leaves. Historically, these butterflies were common in Pittsburgh, but as pawpaw groves disappeared, so did the zebra swallowtail. Without connected corridors of pawpaw trees, the butterfly cannot return to the area in significant numbers.

Unlike many fruiting trees, pawpaws rely on large mammals for seed dispersal. These animals would eat the fruit and deposit seeds elsewhere, aiding natural expansion. However, in urban and suburban areas, the absence of such animals limits the tree's ability to spread. Pawpaw seeds require specific conditions to germinate: a period of cold stratification followed by warm, moist soil. Without natural seed dispersers, human intervention is necessary to ensure new populations take root.

How to Help:

Document species on iNaturalist: Help track existing pawpaw populations and butterfly sightings by logging observations on [iNaturalist](#).

Collect and plant seeds: Harvest pawpaw fruit in the fall, extract the seeds, and plant them in shaded, moist areas. Seeds should be sown immediately or stored in a refrigerator to simulate winter conditions.

Care for saplings: Young pawpaw trees require protection from deer browsing and need consistent moisture. Planting in clusters can improve pollination success, as pawpaws are not self-fertile.

Restore habitat corridors: Plant along trails, riverbanks, and green spaces to create pathways for the zebra swallowtail's return.

