



Pawpaw

Asimina triloba

The pawpaw is the only hardy temperate member of a family of tropical fruit trees. Some people liken the taste of the fruit to a cross between a mango and a banana. The pawpaw is a small tree, usually only about twenty feet tall. A tree usually only has one trunk, but it suckers freely through its roots, forming colonies. The leaves are very large, with a rather rank odor when crushed. The dark red flowers, which point down, are quite attractive when viewed up close. The rather soft and brittle wood can nonetheless be used for things like walking sticks, and often has blue streaks in it. The pawpaw is native to eastern North America. Hardy to zone 5. Folklore claims that John James Audubon used the winter leaf buds for paintbrushes to paint fine detail.

Cultivation

The pawpaw is an understory tree in nature, but grows well as a free-standing tree. It does not like dry areas or heavy clay soils, but is pretty easy to grow otherwise. It does very well as a wood's-edge tree, and is very shade-tolerant. Of course, the more light it receives, the more fruit it's likely to set. Curiously, the tree depends on carrion flies for fertilization; one old method of encouraging flower fertilization is to hang rotting meat in the grove when the trees are in bloom. If you don't want a grove of trees, then plant it in a lawn area where shoots can be mowed down. Do not try to transplant this tree from the wild, since almost all trees you'll find will be sucker shoots, which do not have a good enough local root system. By the time the wild tree has developed a good root system, it is too large to transplant.

Propagation

Pawpaw seeds can be direct-sown, either in native soil or in pots. For best results, plant in the fall and expose to winter weather. These are very easy to grow, but don't be discouraged if they don't emerge early in the spring; they may sprout as late as late June.



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