

The Rise of the Humble Pawpaw

Written by: **Sara Mullins**

The Pawpaw Song

Where, oh where is dear little Nellie?

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Way down yonder in the pawpaw patch.

*Pickin' up pawpaws,
puttin' em in your pocket.*

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Way down yonder in the pawpaw patch.

— American Folk Song



Green pawpaws on the tree – pick when it turns yellow or brown, slightly soft when squeezed, and releases easily from the stem.

It's been called the “hillbilly mango” and the “poor man’s banana.” It grows in the wild, mainly in the region known as Appalachia. But the pawpaw, a rather obscure fruit with a funny name, is finally getting some respect from food and beverage connoisseurs. Beneath its humble greenish-blackish exterior, the pawpaw somewhat resembles a mango. Within lies a creamy yellow, custard-like flesh (plus a few pesky, inedible brown seeds) with a surprisingly tropical flavor, evoking banana and mango and citrus. Nutritional benefits include an abundance of vitamin C, a cornucopia of minerals, plus antioxidants.

Ohio botanist William B. Werthner noted that “The fruit... has a tangy wild-wood flavor peculiarly its own. It is sweet, yet rather cloying to the taste and a wee bit puckery – only a boy can eat more than one at a time.”

Apparently others thought better of the pawpaw; it has been officially designated Ohio’s native state fruit. During the mid-16th century, explorer and conquistador Hernando de Soto set out to discover a legendary city of gold, reputedly located in what is now Florida. Instead he discovered the

pawpaw, a fruit prized and widely cultivated by Native Americans in the Mississippi Valley. Noteworthy fans of the humble fruit include George Washington, who favored chilled pawpaws for dessert; Thomas Jefferson, who grew them at Monticello and sent seeds to friends; and Lewis and Clark, who fortunately enjoyed them, as they occasionally relied upon wild pawpaws for nourishment when their provisions ran low. The abundance of these fruits in western Morgan County, West Virginia, inspired local residents to incorporate their community with the name Paw Paw in 1891. Paw Paw, WV, is located approximately 25 miles from Cumberland, MD, via Rt. 51 South.

The *asimina triloba*, or common pawpaw, is the largest edible fruit native to the United States and the only temperate member of the custard apple or tropical Annonaceae family of flowering plants. Pawpaws grow wild on trees located in 26 states throughout the Eastern United States and Ontario, Canada. They thrive in zones 5 – 8 with hot

summers and cold winters, especially in floodplains and shady bottomlands. Often found in the understory beneath the forest canopy, they tend to grow in clusters. They are pest-resistant and a favorite host plant for the zebra swallowtail butterfly. In spring, pawpaws produce burgundy flowers that look lovely but have an unfortunate reputation for smelling like rotting meat. Once the flowers drop, the pawpaw tree develops green fruit that turns yellow or brown until mature, usually by September to October. It's time to pick when the fruit is slightly soft when squeezed and releases easily from its stem. Fruit that has fallen is usually ready to harvest.



The pawpaw has a creamy yellow, custard-like flesh and a tropical flavor.

While pawpaw trees are pretty tough, the fruit itself is highly perishable, lasting only two to four days at room temperature and up to three weeks when refrigerated. Consequently, pawpaws are generally not found at grocery stores. They are best enjoyed as seasonal treats, available at farmers' markets, outdoor festivals, specialty orchards, and, of course, in the wild.

It was love at first taste for Neal Peterson, a plant scientist who first tasted a pawpaw in 1975. At the time he was pursuing a master's degree in plant genetics at West Virginia University. Although pawpaws grew wild near his childhood home in southern West Virginia, he had never tasted one. While enjoying a fall hike in the WVU Arboretum, he picked up a ripe pawpaw that had fallen on the ground, smelled it, and decided to take a bite. It was a revelation that changed his life. He decided that the pawpaw was a delicacy that should be made widely available for anyone to enjoy. Since then, he has devoted himself to the development and propagation of new cultivars, bred to grow larger with more flesh. To date, he has developed seven, all named after Appalachian waterways – Shenandoah, Susquehanna, Rappahannock, Allegheny, Potomac, Wabash and Tallahatchie.

These fruits of the forest piqued the curiosity of Ohio University food scientist Dr. Rob Brannon, who has been exploring the nutritional value of the pawpaw and its commercial viability. To date, studies indicate that the

pawpaw offers high levels of antioxidants, a wide range of vitamins and minerals, plus an above average protein content. Challenges include the fruit's perishability and unfamiliarity among potential consumers, but Brannon sees sufficient commercial potential to continue his research. If the pawpaw is eventually found to be an all-American superfruit that can be made widely available, Brannon's work will have played a key role in making this scenario a reality.

Meanwhile, Ohio University alumnus Chris Chmiel has found success as a pawpaw processor and supplier using fruit he grows and forages in southern Ohio, an area some consider the



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Pawpaw trees are a favorite host plant for the zebra swallowtail butterfly.



Kentucky State University pawpaw research program's goal is to develop the pawpaw as a commercial tree fruit crop suitable for small farms as a source of income.

“Pawpaw Capital of the World.” His business, Integration Acres, began selling fresh-picked pawpaws in 1996. Since then, its product line includes frozen puree, popsicles, pawpaw-maple vinaigrette, chutney, relish, jam, and notably, pulp that has become wildly popular as an ingredient of multiple beers. Nine pawpaw-flavored beers were featured last year at the mother of all pawpaw festivals, the Ohio Pawpaw Festival in Columbus. The first such brew was concocted 16 years ago. Since then, these beverages have become so popular that pawpaw beer was the signature product at last year's 20th Anniversary Ohio Pawpaw Festival.

Although Ohio has a reputation for superior tasting pawpaws, Kentucky State University is home to the world's only full-time pawpaw research program. Growers, researchers, and anyone curious about pawpaws will find a feast of information at www.pawpaw.kysu.edu. The University maintains a germplasm repository, or gene bank, for the *asimina* species. More than 2,000 trees from 17 states are planted on 12 acres at KSU. More than 45 cultivars have been identified. The goal: to develop the pawpaw as a commercial tree fruit crop suitable for small farms as a source of income.

While researchers and growers are working to establish the pawpaw as a dietary staple, festivals celebrating this humble, homegrown fruit attract a growing number of crowds in West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, South Carolina, Michigan — and, of course, Ohio.

Although the pawpaw is best eaten raw when ripe in the fall, frozen pulp and other pawpaw-infused products are available for purchase online. Several sources are <https://integrationacres.com>, www.earthy.com and www.owennativefoods.com. Or, if you can forage or purchase fresh pawpaws, you can extract the pulp and freeze it. Below are two pawpaw recipes from Kentucky State University to try. Additional recipes can be found at www.pawpaw.kysu.edu or by searching for pawpaw recipes online. Enjoy!

Pawpaw Ice Cream

- 1 quart cold milk
- 6 eggs
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1½ cup sugar
- 1 cup pureed pawpaw pulp, or more to taste
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 quart heavy cream
- 2 Tbsp. vanilla



Scald 3 cups of the milk in the top of a double boiler. Beat eggs well; add salt, sugar, and the remaining cup of milk. Stir egg mixture slowly into the hot milk and cook over a small amount of simmering hot water, stirring constantly, until mixture just coats a clean metal spoon. *To prevent curdling, do not have the water boiling vigorously, and take care not to overcook.* Stop cooking as soon as the custard coats the spoon and remove from heat at once. Cool pan of custard in another pan containing cold water, then chill thoroughly in refrigerator.

Combine pawpaw puree with the lemon juice and add to the chilled custard along with the cream and vanilla. Pour mixture into a chilled 1-gallon ice cream freezer canister and fit dasher into place. Freeze and ripen according to directions accompanying ice cream freezer.

Pawpaw Bread

- 1 cup pawpaw puree
- 1/3 cup shortening
- 2/3 cup sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1¾ cup flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- ¼ tsp. baking soda
- ¾ tsp. salt

Cream shortening, add sugar gradually, and beat until fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Beat in pawpaw puree. Sift together remaining dry ingredients and add in four portions, beating smooth each time. Pour batter into a greased, floured loaf pan (8 x 4 x 3 inches) and bake in a moderate oven (350° F) for about 50 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the loaf comes out clean. Cool on rack before slicing. Serve slices buttered or with cream cheese. Makes 1 loaf.

To vary this recipe, add 1 tsp. pumpkin pie spice, ½ cup chopped pecans, and ½ cup candied orange peel.



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