

Pickin' up pawpaws easy to do in Delaware

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"Pickin' up pawpaws, put 'em in your pockets; Way down yonder in the pawpaw patch" is part of a traditional children's song that I first heard in elementary school in New York City.

Of course, I never actually saw a pawpaw there, since they are virtually non-existent in New York City (except for a few spots on Staten Island), and rare in New York State generally. Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) is native mainly farther south — in the central and southern United States, including Delaware.

Pawpaw is a shrub or small tree, and prefers rich moist soils. It can send up new plants from underground parts and form dense stands, hence the "pawpaw patch" of the song. A good place to observe pawpaw in Delaware is along the appropriately-named Pawpaw Loop trail near Brandywine Creek in Alapocas Run State Park.

Pawpaw fruits are up to 6 inches long, yellowish in color, and have a delicious banana-mango-pineapple flavor. I've had the opportunity to taste pawpaw only once, because fruit-set can be low, and the quickly-over-ripening fruit is favored by wildlife.

The flowers appear in mid-April in Delaware, and are purplish-brown. This color,

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together with a faint unpleasant odor, serves to attract pollinators like flies (which are actually seeking rotting meat on which to lay their eggs). The petals have a rather unusual arrangement of two circles of petals — three inside and three outside.

Pawpaw leaves are the food of the caterpillar of the beautiful zebra swallowtail butterfly. Chemicals in pawpaw, called acetogenins, are toxic to many insects.

However, zebra swallowtails are not only able to eat the leaves, but also gain the benefit of then becoming unpalatable to birds and other predators themselves.

The scientific name *Asimina* is derived from the Native American name "assimin", and triloba from the flower shape (like a three-cornered hat). The common name may come from a resemblance of the fruit to papaya.

Pawpaw is in the mostly-tropical custard-apple family (*Annonaceae*). In fact, out of the total 130 genera (2,500 species) of *Annonaceae* in the world, only pawpaw (*Asimina*) is found in temperate regions. The 8 species of *Asimina* in the USA in-



Delaware State University/Dr. Susan Yost
These pawpaw (*Asiminatriloba*) flowers had just opened in mid-April, on a tree planted at Delaware State University. The purplish color helps to attract fly pollinators.

clude our native pawpaw (*Asiminatriloba*), dwarf pawpaw (*Asiminaparviflora*) which grows in a number of southeastern states,

and 6 other species that are located only in Florida and sometimes one or two adjoining states. There are only two other genera of *Annonaceae* in the USA: *Annona* (two species, both Florida), and *Deeringothamnus* (two species, both Florida).

In the tropics, the custard-apple family produces some large edible fruits, such as cherimoya, soursop, guanabana and custard apple. Some of these are available as canned beverages in local supermarkets.

Our native pawpaw is not a commercially important crop in the United States, but there is some interest in developing this. Pawpaw is hardy to zone 5, and is available in some specialty nurseries.

It doesn't transplant well from the wild, but grows well from seed-grown plants. Some cultivars, with large fruits, are grafted. To get pawpaw fruits, it's important to plant two genetically different trees to allow cross-pollination; otherwise there won't be any pawpaw fruits to "put in your pocket".

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.