

Knowing Our Natives: Pawpaw

With flowers that smell like rotting meat and fruit that tastes of a banana crossed with a mango, you might think the pawpaw sounds like something straight out of the rainforest. And you would be mostly right, the pawpaw tree (*Asimina triloba*) is the northernmost member of a family of tropical trees, including ylang-ylang (*Cananga odorata*) and custard apples (*Annona* sp.). Distributed across the eastern United States through Michigan and even up into Ontario, this plant, once dispersed by giant ground sloths and other megafauna, is a tree with a lot of history.

Midwestern Indigenous American tribes have a long tradition of cultivating pawpaws, with the Latin name *Asimina* originating from the Powhatan word for this fruit. The pawpaw has also picked up many colorful regional names, including Indiana banana, banango, and hillbilly mango.

The large fruit is sweet and tangy with a creamy texture similar to a banana, but you're unlikely to find one in the grocery store; they keep for just 3 days at room temperature, and maybe a week refrigerated. The short timeframe combined with being soft and easy to bruise makes pawpaw tough to ship commercially, but you may find them at local farmers markets in late summer or early fall.



Pawpaw trees grow well in partial sun or full shade, thriving in forest understories until a gap forms and they can push into the canopy. You'll often find pawpaws growing together in groves or patches because mature trees send out rhizomes -- horizontal stems that sprout a new tree genetically identical to the original tree. But trees growing from the same rhizome can't pollinate each other, so the pawpaw relies on pollination from flies and beetles that are attracted to its foul-smelling flowers.

Pawpaws have very few diseases or pests and produce toxins in their leaves and twigs to keep deer from browsing. These toxins make them the exclusive host of zebra swallowtail butterfly larva; by eating the leaves as caterpillars, the adult butterflies are bitter tasting and protected from predators.

A tree with many unique features, the pawpaw is a paw-sitively amazing native plant!

Each month, the Beal Botanical Garden's newsletter will feature a plant native to Michigan exploring its historical, cultural, and economic importance. Our aim is to introduce (maybe reintroduce!) our community to our wonderful native plants.