

Pawpaw Trees: A Native Fruit

'Food Forest', 'Edible Forest' and 'Forest Gardening' are all terms that describe similar concepts—creating a low maintenance garden with shrubs, trees and understory plants that mimic a woodland ecosystem while also supplying the gardener with a variety of fresh produce.

Unlike the lone pair of apple or pear trees in the middle of your lawn, a food forest layers fruit and nut trees with perennial vegetables, vines of fruit and ground cover herbs all intermingled together.

One of the beginning principals of creating a food forest is to identify species that are well adapted for your climate—natives being preferred over all else.

A native fruit tree to eastern Kansas, the pawpaw, is often overlooked by many gardeners. The pawpaw tree has fruit resembling a fat banana, as big as 6 inches long and 3 inches wide. This pale green, tropical looking fruit also brings to the Kansas plains an exotic taste. The fruit is often described as a cross between a banana and a pineapple. With a custard-like texture it is best eaten raw and fresh from your garden.

Pawpaw's are less notable than many other fruits because they are difficult to ship and store, making them undesirable for commercial growth.

Although commercial growers may not relish in the delights of the pawpaw, those same qualities make the tree ideal for a food forest! There may not be time to box and ship pawpaws but the produce holds for 2-3 days at room temperature and up to a week in the refrigerator.

When planting your pawpaw tree, dig a hole only as deep as the root system but 2-3 times as wide, just as you would for any other tree. Just as with other trees, adding organic matter to this hole may seem like a good idea, but it can create a soggy pot that will drown the tree. If your soils need organic matter (the pawpaw prefers a high organic matter content) incorporate organic matter to the entire area in which the tree will be planted before you dig the hole—at least a 10x10 foot square. Adding 2 inches of organic matter to the soil surface, and tilling it in, will create an area of increased water penetration and high nutrients for your tree to grow into, rather than a mushy pit.

A happy pawpaw has moderately acidic soils (pH 5.5-7.0) that drain well but stay moist. Mulch, spanning a 3 foot circle around the trunk, helps maintain moisture without drowning the tree. Mulch also helps cut down on weeds that compete with the tree for moisture and nutrients. As a native to eastern Kansas, pawpaws may require irrigation if grown in central or western parts of the state.

In a natural forest, pawpaw's are an understory tree. For your food forest, consider planting the tree in partial shade, especially for the first few years. Wind protection is also advisable as the large leaves make excellent sails in high Kansas winds.

Although some protection is needed, the pawpaw grows up to 20 feet high and about 10 feet wide, so leave plenty of room for growth without hitting powerlines or gutters!

If you're planting one pawpaw, plant another one or two at the same time! These trees require cross-pollination to produce fruit, just like your apples and pears. Three different varieties will produce the best results, and will help to fill out your food forest at the same time!

Proximity is also a consideration for pawpaws. The beetles and flies that pollinate the pawpaws need the trees to be no further than 30ft apart for optimal fruit onset.

Thanks to their fleshy roots, pawpaws are best planted in the spring, around April. Newly planted trees need to be well-watered, but not waterlogged.

Although uncommon, pawpaws are a natural part of eastern Kansas ecosystems and can be an excellent addition to a home garden. Consider this tropical doppelganger for your backyard, and maybe it will be the first step in starting your own food forest.

Additional Resources

There has been a significant amount of work done on pawpaw by Kentucky State University. You can reach their pawpaw site at <http://www.pawpaw.kysu.edu/>.

The University of Missouri has a couple of different pawpaw cultivar trials. Results from one of these trials can be found at <http://www.centerforagroforestry.org/pubs/pawpaws.pdf>.

Information on growing pawpaws is available from Peterson Pawpaws at <http://www.petersonpawpaws.com> Neil Peterson's pawpaws are the result of over 25 years of research and have been widely tested. Though Neil no longer sells his varieties directly, he does list a number of nurseries that carry them.

For information on how to create a food forest in your backyard, the USDA has the following 'Forest Garden Guide': <http://files.ctctcdn.com/5e103cf0301/598a899c-da7a-4a96-aebe-402d16d42c2b.pdf>