

Unusual Fruits for Kansas Gardeners

At one point in time, Kansas was an exporter of fruits in the United States. According to the Kansas Fruit Growers Association, in 1880, the Kansas State Board of Agriculture reported 2,386,812 apple, 5,091,549 peach and 935,897 cherry, pear and plum trees. We can thank prohibition and a few extreme weather events for the reduction in Kansas fruit growers. Although we may never be the fruit producing state we once were, there is the potential for many fruit plants, trees and shrubs to thrive in Kansas. Often when we think of fruit grown in Kansas apples, strawberries and blueberries—even in spite of our incompatible soils for blueberries—come to mind. Many native or adaptable fruit species are forgotten about altogether. Although unusual, many of these fruit species are lower maintenance than traditionally cultivated fruits while still providing a bountiful and delicious harvest.

The Juneberry, or Serviceberry is a recognized ornamental tree, but not typically thought of for its edibility. The *Amelanchier* species is a shrub and tree species that produces blueberry-sized blue, purple, red or white fruits in June and July. This fruit has a taste more like a sweet cherry than a blueberry. Native to every state in the continental United States, plants in this species produce clouds of white blossoms in early spring. Juneberry plants are easy to grow and adaptable to cool and hot weather. Juneberries will tolerate partial shade and are adaptable to a variety of soil types. They are best planted in the fall as spring planted Juneberries may not produce flowers or fruit in the first year. Shrub species are best for peak fruit production and ease of harvest. Many homeowners prefer the tree species for its beauty as a “front yard” tree. While the trees are beautiful, their fruit is often lost to the birds, which for some, can be an attractive feature. White berried trees are thought to be less desirable to the birds. For our region, K-State recommends two varieties of Juneberry. The Allegheny Serviceberry, grows to be less than 20’ tall and 10–15’ wide. This variety is more of a tree form than most serviceberries. It has nice, white flower clusters and beautiful orange color in fall. The Spring Flurry Serviceberry is another small tree growing to a height less than 20’ tall and 15–20’ wide. It has a strong central leader with a good, upright growth habit, nice white flower clusters, an orange color in fall and purple to blue edible fruit.

The Pawpaw tree is another Kansas native with a uniquely tropical tasting fruit. The pawpaw tree has fruit resembling a fat banana, as big as 6 inches long and 3 inches wide. This pale green 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. 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. In nature, pawpaws are understory trees so 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 power lines or gutters! These trees require cross-pollination to produce fruit, just like your apples and

pears. Three *different* varieties will produce the best results. 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.

Mulberries are yet another Kansas native fruit shrub and tree. Mulberry fruit are shaped just like a blackberry but can be white, purple, dark red or black. Mulberries are wind pollinated with some varieties possessing the ability to set fruit without any pollination. Mulberry plants tolerate drought, pollution and poor soil. The mulberry buds develop in later spring and are generally unaffected or only moderately affected by spring frost. Most cultivars need at least 15' to spread and full sun. Their berries can stain surfaces so they should be planted away from walkways. As with Juneberries, birds love mulberries. Unlike the Juneberry, mulberries produce so much fruit that birds typically cannot take it all for themselves. It is a good idea, however, to avoid planting mulberry plants near where you park your car as the birds do make a mess of the berries.

If you haven't had enough of unusual fruits, make sure to read next Saturday's column where we will discuss the merits of four more fruits!