

Pawpaw

(*Asimina triloba*)

By *Fred Nation*, Educator and Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Pawpaw is a small deciduous tree to about 25 feet tall. It is sometimes seen as a large colonial shrub that reproduces by root sprouts to form thickets. The range is throughout most of the eastern and midwestern United States, from New York, west to Nebraska, south into Alabama and Georgia, with a few isolated pockets in northern Florida. In Alabama, pawpaw is usually found in the understory of moist, fertile, wooded sites, in the northern three-quarters of the state. The similar but smaller dwarf pawpaw, *Asimina parviflora* is the only species found in southwestern and extreme southern Alabama.

One of the first native plants to be documented by Europeans in the New World, pawpaw was described by the DeSoto expedition in the American Southeast in 1541. Later, in the eighteenth century, William Bartram mentioned pawpaws several times in his "Travels," and he described the ripe fruit as having "a very delicious yellow pulp."

The bark of *Asimina triloba* is dark brown and thin, eventually developing shallow vertical cracks. The strong, fibrous inner bark was used by the Indians and early settlers for fish stringers, and the fibers were braided into cordage. The leaves are pointed at both ends, to about 10 inches long, 3 inches



Photo by Fred Nation

wide, broadest above the middle. They superficially resemble the foliage of several other native trees and shrubs, including tupelo trees, in the genus *Nyssa*, but a simple field test may be used to reliably distinguish pawpaw from other species. When crushed, the aromatic leaves of pawpaws have the strong, distinctive odor of green peppers or green tomatoes! *Asimina* foliage is the only larval host for one of our most beautiful insects: the spectacular zebra swallowtail butterfly. Historically the leaves have been used medicinally, as a poultice to treat wounds and abscesses.

The flowers, opening in early spring as the new foliage develops, are an inch

or so across, brownish purple, with six petals in two rows of three. The unusual fruits are cylindrical, 2 to 5 inches long, sometimes curved, "peanut-shaped," or resembling small blunt bananas. When ripe, in late summer, the fruits are usually yellow, sometimes brownish or purple, and they are sweet and edible, with the flavor and fragrance of bananas or pineapples. The large, hard, brown seeds are reported to be toxic, and they have been powdered and used as an insecticide for fleas and head lice.

Ripe pawpaws are hard to find in the woods, because they are eagerly foraged by wildlife including possums, squirrels, foxes, raccoons, and many bird species. Research is underway to develop marketable pawpaw fruits, and recent studies indicate that the compounds may eventually prove useful as organic insecticides and pharmaceuticals.

The nursery trade occasionally offers pawpaw trees for sale. They are sometimes seen in landscapes as small specimen trees, and they are planted in butterfly gardens for the benefit of the zebra swallowtails. The Alabama state champion *Asimina triloba* is 30.8 inches in circumference, 57 feet tall, with an average crown spread of 22 feet, located in Randolph County. 🌳



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