

Paw paw picking and baking entwined in area's history

by Kate Evans

Nestled in fertile valleys, along river banks and in rich woodlands in Morgan County, the paw paw tree grows bearing a custard-like fruit that has a mixed flavor of banana, mango, pineapple and cantaloupe. Paw paw is the largest native fruit that grows in the United States. The fruit is often eaten raw but the paw paw pulp is used in a variety of dishes from bread and pudding to salsa and ice cream.

Paw Paw namesake

The Town of Paw Paw, West Virginia as well as the Paw Paw Tunnel and the Paw Paw Bends of the Potomac River are named after this native tree. Locals go paw paw picking in the woods and along the rivers, C&O Canal and the railroad. Some say that wild paw paw trees are more prolific in our area now than they ever were, no doubt from the animals that eat their fruit and spread its seeds.

The paw paw tree is native to the eastern and mid-western United States and is found as far west as Texas and Nebraska and as far north as Canada and New York. Towns and villages named Paw Paw exist in Kentucky, Indiana, Michigan and Illinois. Michigan also has the Paw Paw River and the Paw Paw Railroad.

The paw paw has many common names including wild banana, hillbilly mango, Quaker delight, West Virginia banana, Appalachian banana, Hoosier banana, prairie banana, American custard apple and poor man's banana.

About paw paws

Paw paw trees can be shrub-sized or nearly 35 feet in height. The paw paw fruit ripens in August, September or October, depending on the region.

The scientific name for paw paw is *Asimina triloba* and the tree has large green oval-shaped leaves that turn yellow in the fall. The paw paw fruit is initially green then turns yellow and brown as it matures. The fruits are eaten by raccoons, opossums, grey foxes, squirrels and black bear. Deer rarely eat the leaves.

Paw paw trees are easily grown from their dark seeds but it takes seven to eight years for the seedlings to yield fruit.

History

Paw paws existed before the Ice Age and were probably spread by giant mammals of the era before their extinction. Humans became the central disperser of paw paws later in history.

The written history of paw paws goes back to before the mid-1500s. Native Americans were found cultivating paw paws east of the Mississippi by Spanish explorers in 1541. The Pawnee, Choctaw and Kansa Native American tribes all have names for the paw paw fruit in their languages.

George Washington is said to have enjoyed chilled paw paws as a favorite dessert and the Lewis and Clark Expedition ate paw paws during their travels when provisions ran low. Thomas Jefferson also planted paw paw trees at his home at Monticello, Virginia.

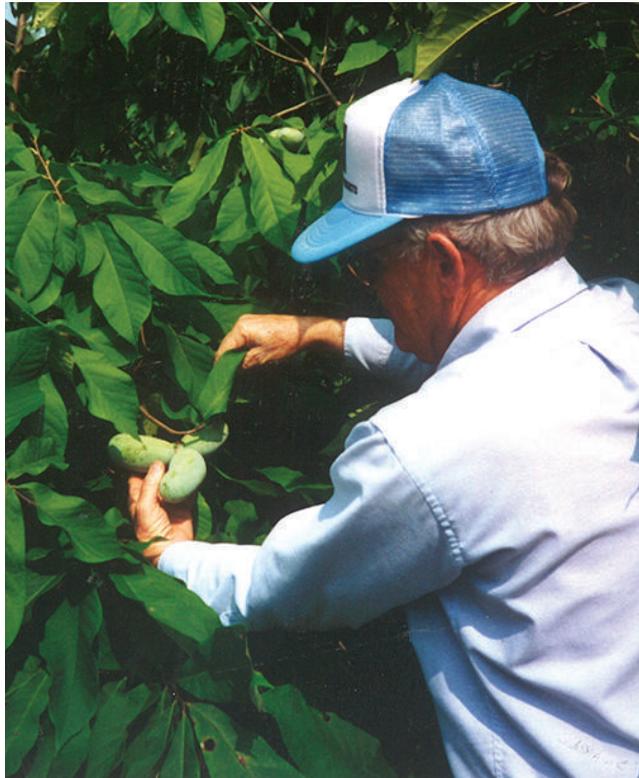
Naturalist John James Audubon depicted paw paw foliage and fruit in his illustration of the yellow-billed cuckoo in "Birds of America."

Paw paws are being cultivated in some states including Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio and Massachusetts.

Former Morgan County Commissioner and Town of Paw Paw Councilman Brown Norton said there is an orchard in Jefferson County that's completely based on the production of paw paws. It's called Peterson Pawpaws.

Local tales

Norton said that he and his wife Barbara Norton used to go pick their own paw paws in the woods and make paw paw cookies. The last several years someone has brought them paw paws that they picked.



Checking on paw paws along the C&O Canal.

Norton said there used to be a lot more interest in paw paws. In 1976 the Lions Club gave little paw paw trees away. Town resident L.J. Nettles took some paw paw trees to Washington D.C. and planted them on the traffic circle that goes around the capitol. Last Norton heard the trees were faring pretty well.

Norton and Jeanie Martin both talked about the two big paw paw trees that were by the Paw Paw Post Office that are gone now. The trees were dug up during town construction. There are also two paw paw trees planted by Paw Paw High School. Martin said that paw paw trees had to be planted in twos for pollination.

Jeanie Martin said that paw paw trees grow down by the C&O Canal and along the Potomac and Cacapon Rivers. She and her husband Vince Martin bought two paw paw trees and planted them when Paw Paw had its centennial event in 1991. Mr. Nettles, who passed away, grew paw paw trees from seed. Cultivated paw paw trees have much bigger fruits, she noted. Paw paw fruits are very perishable and bruise easily.

Jeannie Martin said the town tried to start a Paw Paw Festival Day years back and had contests for the best paw paw baked goods, paw paw ice cream and the biggest paw paw.

Former Paw Paw Mayor Helena Moser said that she went to the Paw Paw Tunnel and canal to pick paw paws where they grow in abundance. They just ate them raw, though she's tried several times to make things with paw paws. She said that some make pudding with the fruit. Moser noted that Barbara Norton, their town historian, published a collection of paw paw recipes.

The town did a lot with paw paws during their centennial celebration and sold and planted paw paw trees, Moser said. She believed some were also planted in the town park then. Moser has a little green ceramic bank shaped like paw paws that was possibly made by the Lions Club many years ago as a fundraiser.

What to make with that Paw Paw Fruit

Paw Paw resident Jeanie (Hott) Martin shared several of her favorite paw paw recipes that she likes to make.

Paw Paw Cookies

Cream 3/4 cup shortening and 1-1/3 cup sugar.

Add 1 egg, beaten and 1-1/2 cups paw paw pulp.

Add 3 cups flour, 1 tablespoon soda, 1/4 teaspoon ginger and allspice and 1 teaspoon each cinnamon and nutmeg.

Bake 12-15 minutes at 350 degrees. Makes 36 cookies.

Paw Paw Bread

2 1/2 cups flour

2 teaspoons baking soda

1/4 teaspoons salt

2 cups sugar

1 cup butter, softened

4 eggs

1/2 teaspoons vanilla

3 cups paw paw pulp

Whisk flour, baking soda and salt. Cream sugar and butter. Add eggs one at a time, beating after each addition. Add vanilla and then pulp, and beat to combine. Add dry ingredients.

Use 2 regular-sized loaf pans and bake 45 minutes at 350 degrees.

Paw Paw Ice Cream

Combine 2 cups paw paw pulp and 1 cup sugar. Stir in 2 cups cream and 2 cups milk.

Pour mixture into ice cream maker and freeze.



(continued to page 18)