

First, it seems that many paw paw aficionados only consider the fruit to be ripe if the skin is brown, and the fruit is actually on the ground. Hence that wonderfully repetitive line “Pickin’ up paw paws put ‘em in your pocket.” It is said that you can actually smell the fruit at this stage, and it is at its peak of richness, almost fermented. (Be aware that Mr. Moore indicates that the brown skin, if eaten, can cause stomach complaints, and that the seeds should never be eaten as they contain toxins of some sort.)

Kristie and I investigated numerous groves along the Potomac that day and did not find any “brown and down” paw paws, although signs in the area indicated that some wild critters may already have. So, we resorted to the second method of harvest from the book, which is to simply give the tree a gentle shake, and see what falls off.

Most paw paw trees are slender, again almost bamboo-like in their straightness, so it is easy to put your hand on the trunk and give the tree a little rattle. Gentle is the key word here because the paw paw itself can get rather large, so a vigorous shake can cause even unripe fruit to be dislodged and fall to the ground, and the fruit will not ripen if separated from the tree while it is still unripe.

I was quickly able to tell when I had finally found a truly ripe paw paw. One tree I shook dropped two of the hillbilly bananas on the ground, both hit with a satisfying “thwack,” kind of like the sound a large egg makes when it accidentally rolls of the kitchen counter onto the floor. Looking over I saw the lime green paw paw on the ground, the skin had ruptured in a few places allowing the bright yellow inner fruit to squish out of the cracks in the skin.

Breaking open the skin we discovered why the paw paw is often referred to as a Custard Apple.

Creamy, smooth and seed filled, the inside of a ripe paw paw is a delight to the palate. To be sure it is a mess to eat, especially by hand along the towpath. The fruit is sticky to the lips, fingers and the cheeks if you dive into it face first. Kristie’s first pronouncement was that it tasted like a mango. I have never eaten a mango, but seldom disagree with my wife and took her word for it. Trying a smaller fruit later I swore it tasted like a banana, or at least banana candy. Turns out we are both probably right as one of the many other nicknames for this river fruit is Bango.

To sum up though, it seems to be important that the paw paw feel soft when gently squeezed. Probably it takes some practice to get good at that, and most of the fruit is way too high in the tree to reach, so we just settled on the “shake the tree and duck your head” method. Regardless of method, hard and green skinned fruit should be avoided, that was my mistake for years.

Andrew Moore’s paw paw book talks about a variety of uses for the fruit, including ice cream, beer, gelato, dried and ground into flour, etc., and I have found it to be exceptional if you bring a few home and chill them overnight in the fridge. But perhaps the absolute best way to enjoy them is out there in the natural habitat, just like the raccoons, ‘possums and other wild creatures do.

Paw paws occur widely in river bottom ecosystems throughout our region so you might find them about anywhere it is wet. My understanding of Park Service policy on fruits and nuts and such is that limited harvesting for personal use is permitted, so enjoy a few and leave plenty for the next visitors.

Now I will have to change my presentation to the school kids. Next time I am asked if I have eaten a paw paw I will say “Yes I have, they are very good, but only when they are ripe.”

Just in case my references to the paw paw song have baffled some of you I will leave you with the words as I know them. I have no idea of the song’s author or origin, just that it is a part of American folk history.

*Where, oh, where, oh where is Susie?*

*Where, oh, where, oh where is Susie?*

*Where, oh, where, oh where is Susie?*

*Way down yonder in the paw paw patch.*

*Pickin’ up paw paw’s put ‘em in your pocket.*

*Pickin’ up paw paw’s put ‘em in your pocket.*

*Pickin up paw paw's put ‘em in your pocket.*

*Way down yonder in the paw paw patch.*

*Come on kids let’s go find her.*

*Come on kids let’s go find her.*

*Come on kids let’s go find her.*

*Way down yonder in the paw paw patch.*

Hope you enjoy that for the rest of your day.



Ripe paw paws.

photo by Helen Herlocker



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