

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Look for it now in Southwest Ohio!

7/18/2021



Left to right: paw paw leaves, flowers, fruit. Photos by Dave Woehr.

Paw Paw (*Asimina triloba*)

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The Paw Paw is quite common here in southern Ohio as well as throughout the eastern United States, the Midwest, and into the south as far as Louisiana and Texas. The tree's name is spelled several ways including paw paw or pawpaw.

The Paw Paw is an understory tree living in the shade of its larger neighbors. It is said to never exceed 30 feet in height. It is an early bloomer in the spring, often producing its small maroon flowers in the month of March, with the flowers appearing on bare limb tips before the leaves unfurl. After blooming takes place, the distinctive leaves appear. They are deep green and very tropical-looking. Leaves can be up to 10 inches long and several inches wide.

By early summer fruit begins to appear on the branches. It appears singly or in clusters of up to three or four and camouflages nicely with its green color matching the leaves among which it hides. In our area, the fruit ripens in August and September.

The fruits are edible, and people like to collect them. Recipes for Paw Paw include puddings, bread, jams, desserts, and the like. There is even Paw Paw beer!

To learn more about this species visit the [Ohio Department of Natural Resources website](#).

FUN FACTS

- Some of the fruits are the size of an Idaho potato and nearly as heavy.
- Early settlers and pioneers of our area didn't call the Paw Paw the "West Virginia Banana" for nothing. Cut a Paw Paw open and you will find a pulp having the consistency of custard and a very strong banana-like flavor.
- The fruit is a popular food source for wildlife, including raccoons, gray foxes, and squirrels.
- The tree is also the host plant for the Zebra Swallowtail whose larvae feed on the leaves after hatching from eggs laid on them earlier by an adult butterfly.
- In addition to reproducing from seed, Paw Paw trees colonize in patches by sending out a root matrix from the parent tree from which new shoots emerge.
- Thus, while hiking in the woods you may come upon Paw Paw stands that are comprised of dozens of trees all linked together by interconnected root systems.