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Pawpaws — mythical fruit

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Pawpaws might be the largest edible fruit indigenous to North America. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Pawpaws are a fruit with mythical status, more prominent in songs than stores. I've been chasing them since I was in the Northeast. When you taste their tropical decadence and your body's sent humming by their superabundant nutrients, you're sure they grow in some place far from our dark rainy shores.

It has been posited that the largest edible fruit indigenous to North America has been growing here since it was orphaned by the split of Pangaea. It retained its sumptuous flavor while adapting to colder temperatures, particularly those of the Midwest and East Coast. A ripe pawpaw has the texture of rich custard and the taste of banana-pineapple-mango, perhaps with a hint of kiwi.

Shelf life is the downside to this delicious fruit. It is so perishable that you're unlikely to find it outside of farmers markets or fancy eateries that source it locally for ice cream, smoothies or beer. It's easier to grow it than buy it, and fortunately our climate is reasonably hospitable to this charming tree.

Just like the fruit hearkens to something equatorial, the leaves have the size and shine of a jungle plant. They always have a pendulous quality no matter the height of the tree, which usually reaches something like 25 feet as it spreads to a pyramidal growth habit. As such, it is a great understory tree for beneath our existing canopies.

As an understory tree, pawpaws do not require the full sunlight of taller trees. This doesn't mean that they prefer darkness, although too much light will burn saplings. I'm told they will fruit even in partial shade, but the fruiting specimens I have seen bask in full sun at least some of the day. Because the pawpaw spreads by lateral roots that form adventitious shoots, it might be able to feed a root network by migrating thickets into sun patches.

Walnuts are one Northwest tree particularly suited to towering over a belt of pawpaws. The Juglans genus, which includes English and black walnuts, exudes a toxin, juglone, from its roots.

This compound has been found to damage and kill apple trees up to 50 feet distant from black walnut trees. Juglone is particularly prevalent at the base of black walnuts, and stifles competition from most other foliage — but not pawpaws.

Soils recommended for pawpaws are rich, moist and well-drained. I've planted them in clay, silty loam, near water, and in sand and have seen them survive in all circumstances. They don't like wet feet but appreciate access to water.

Competition from trailing blackberry has been the biggest problem so far, and deer have been no problem at all. At the moment, sand with a lot of bigleaf maple duff seems to yield the best results, but that remains to be seen as the trees flower and bear fruit.

In keeping with the tree's other exceptional qualities, the flowers are fleshy, showy purplish growths with a whiff of rotting meat. Take comfort knowing that if we lose honeybees to colony collapse disorder, mites, and murder hornets, the pawpaws will still be pollinated as long as there are carrion flies and beetles. Some orchardists have been known to throw guts around their pawpaws, but it's more common to pollinate them by hand.

Given that pawpaws are most common on the East Coast and in the Midwest, I wanted to be sure they would yield in the Northwest. Sure enough, I found a bearing tree in Belfair and another in Portland. Local nurseries supply and continue to develop this tree, spreading food sovereignty wherever it grows.

A Wisconsin founder of a permaculture intentional community, Dreamtime Village, said he is planting pawpaw patches all over their land, because no one is planting pawpaws this far north (we are!) and they will be feeding everyone in 50 years. In these times of instability and rapid change, one can see why he believes that planting pawpaw patches is the most radical thing you can do.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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