

Pawpaws and Persimmons

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I think I have planted as many fruit and berry plants as I can fit into my limited garden space. My grandchildren and the birds enjoy my figs, a few apple varieties, plums and blueberries. I am still trying to grow my own pawpaw tree to eventually experience the taste of the divine, elusive, native fruit. It has been described as having a powerful aroma and almost tropical flavor, resembling a combination of banana, mango, and pineapple. Some say you should eat a pawpaw in a custard cup because it tastes like crème brulee.

“Picking up pawpaws, puttin’ ‘em in your pocket,...way down yonder in the pawpaw patch.” It is reported that the Lewis and Clark Expedition depended and sometimes subsisted on pawpaws during their travels. Chilled pawpaw fruit was a favorite dessert of George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson planted them at Monticello. Jefferson had seeds sent to his friends in France probably to impress them.

Kentucky State University has had a program since 1990 directed toward developing pawpaw as a new commercial tree fruit crop for Kentucky and the southeastern United States. The pawpaw [*Asimina triloba* (L.) Dunal] tree produces the largest edible tree fruit native to the United States, reaching over one pound in size. They are hardy to growing zone 5 and grow wild in the hardwood forests of 26 states in the eastern United States. Pawpaws usually flourish in the deep, rich, fertile soils of river-bottom lands where they grow as understory trees or thicket-shrubs. They can mature in both full sun and partial shade, but it is said that the fruit tastes better when it is exposed to full sun. Those who sell the trees will recommend that you purchase two trees in order to get the pawpaw tree to bear fruit. Pawpaw has low fruit set, especially in the wild, and is thought to be self-infertile. There are currently more than forty pawpaw cultivars commercially available. I have planted at least four pawpaws and I have one left. It is about 7 years old and resembles a 5 foot stick with a few leaves. I don't have a lot of hope for this little, lone twig but I may buy one more plant before I quit.

Although I haven't yet had a taste of the pawpaw fruit, I have experienced the pleasure of eating native persimmons, *Diospyros virginiana*, whose genus name translates as “fruit of the gods.” In the fall they are soft, sweet and delicious. Woe be unto one who eats a persimmon before it is fully ripe. The best description is that it makes your mouth pucker. The idea that frost is required before persimmon fruit become edible is incorrect. Many varieties, including some of the best, lose their “pucker-power” as they become ripe long before frost has a chance to do its work. I have an Asian persimmon tree that is not astringent at all. In the South, the Asian persimmon is worth looking into since you can find dozens of named varieties, at least one of which is bound to delight you.

Native Americans added persimmons to their cornbread as a sweetener, dried the pulp for winter fruit, ground seeds into meal, and even made a beer-like drink by combining persimmons and honey locust pods. I just like to eat them right from the tree.

The native persimmon produces either male or female flowers. This means that both male and female trees are necessary to produce a crop of fruit. I won't be planting Mr. and Mrs. Native Persimmon in my garden but I know where to find some full-grown trees to shake in the woods near my house. I have had great success with my very productive Asian Fuyu persimmon which has lovely crisp, sweet non-astringent fruits in the late fall. They look like small orange tomatoes. I have found this small tree is easy to grow and produces loads of fruit. Last year, I kept fruits in my refrigerator until nearly Christmas. I like them raw, cut into wedges although they can be put in salads and other recipes.

Scattered throughout the woodlands are hidden native treasures waiting to be discovered. Tasty fruits grow on these beautiful trees that can also be planted in your own garden. For more information or answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.

