Pawpaw trees aren't rare in Illinois, but finding enough pawpaws to eat just might give you a headache.

The Problem With Pawpaws

Story By Joe McFarland
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For those of us who'll try anything once, here's a healthy suggestion: Don't ever try shaking a pawpaw tree (*Asimina triloba*) in an attempt to collect the ripe fruits.

You might try it once, but never twice. As these potato-size "gifts" come plummeting downward like sacks of flour, you'll quickly realize the error of your judgement.

If it's any consolation, you wouldn't be the first human to get bonked on the head while trying to tease a few extra pawpaws into your possession; nobody ever manages to gather a satisfactory supply of this rich, native Illinois fruit. Wildlife seem to gobble them up the instant they reach the ground. And, perhaps more frustrating is the fact relatively few pawpaw trees grow large enough to produce fruits at all.

The oblong to egg-shaped fruits known as pawpaws ripen in early to mid September in Illinois.

If you can't identify these native Illinois fruits, you're not alone. Pawpaws, the fruits of the pawpaw tree, appear to resemble a tropical fruit.

Never heard of pawpaws? You're not alone. The pawpaw tree is something of a botanical enigma in Illinois. With its massive, drooping leaves (up to 12 inches long) and banana-flavored fruits, *Asimina triloba* might seem indisputably foreign in the Prairie State, yet it's not. Shadowy ravines and river bottoms are common habitats for this short, forest understory component which occurs from southern Illinois all the way up to Chicago.

Pawpaw trees might reach a mere 10-15 feet high (rarely more than 25 feet), yet they can be quite impressive. During April, burgundy-colored, bell-shaped flowers appear on branches and eventually produce green, thin-skinned fruits with a creamy yellow interior flesh. The oblong fruits can be as small as a chicken egg or as large as a baking potato and eventually ripen to a softness by early to mid September. A major disappointment for anyone sampling the

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Pawpaw trees produce distinctive, burgandy blossoms during April, yet the relatively small trees often fail to produce their namesake fruits.

fruit is the size of the seeds. One doesn't need to cut deeply into the flesh before encountering two or three large, smooth seeds filling up space where we'd rather see fruit.

Despite the flaws, it's easy to see why pawpaws are compared to distant rain forest exotics. The lightly mottled, green-yellow-brown fruits taste somewhat like a banana and are every bit as filling. Nutritional analysis indicates plenty of potassium—just like bananas—as well as large amounts of vitamins A and C, plus good, unsaturated fats.

Yet obtaining those pawpaws remains the perennial challenge.

"Critters always seem to get to them first," observed Southern Illinois University-Carbondale Department of Forestry Associate Professor James Zaczek, who suggests close monitoring of trees when pawpaws begin to ripen in September. "It's a race against the animals," he added.

Zaczek often teaches fall-semester students how to identify the odd-looking fruits sometimes found within Thompson Woods on campus. But the instructor recalled one instance when students cleverly added their own, college-party twist: "They made pawpaw coladas."

Farther upstate in north-central Illinois, folks around Lee County don't need to be taught about *Asimina triloba*. The reason: Paw Paw, Illinois is a Lee County hamlet where several hundred residents can trace their community history to U.S. Army General Winfield Scott, who made an early 19th-century stop at an unusual forest grove along the Chicago-Galena Trail.

According to Scott, writing years later, "There was also a small tree that grew here, unknown to many settlers, it bore a sweet fruit similar to the taste of a banana and its shape. [sic] This was called the Paw Paw, from which this city derived its name."

And while Scott's visit is now distant history, residents near Paw Paw still nurture remnant populations of their namesake tree.

Department of Natural Resources District Forester Randy Timmons, who monitors the forest groves around Lee County, said this shade-loving tree—which nonetheless thrives in sunshine—is enjoying a minor revival as gardeners and landscape designers increasingly select for native species.

"I'll get calls from landowners wanting to know where to get seeds from local trees," Timmons explained, adding, "Pawpaws are easy to propagate, but first you have to know where to find a source of seeds."

For those without a local pawpaw patch, garden catalogs now offer pawpaw seeds and stock. Plant two or more trees to ensure pollination. Also, know that a huge taproot prohibits easy transplanting, so it's best to be positive when selecting a planting site. After several years or more, with a small amount of luck, pawpaw fruits will appear on the branches. And, despite our advice, you will probably try shaking the tree.

Just once.