Haddam Garden Club
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What's That Tree?

There are as many reasons to plant a tree as there are gardens: It's just the right size or shape for that spot. It offers seasonal color. It's to commemorate a family milestone. If it's native, like white oaks, it supports the most pollinators. All good reasons, but have you ever grown something out of pure curiosity?

Last week I planted two paw paw trees. I'd never seen the plant before, never tasted the fruit, never even seen it for sale, not that I would have recognized it. But I've seen it mentioned in horticultural publications here and there, and decided to give it a try, just because.

The paw paw tree, *Asimina triloba*, is the only tropical and largest edible fruit native to North America, and used to be common in woodlands from southern Canada to northern Florida, and across the Midwest. It was a staple of Native America diets, a favorite of early presidents, and sustained the Lewis and Clark expedition when food was running low. It supplemented early settlers' rations during the wait for newly-planted European imports to mature, and fed the rural poor during the Great Depression. The fruit is about six inches long, shaped like a fat banana, with a flavor described as a cross between banana, pineapple, and pear. In fact, one of its nicknames is 'poor man's banana.' So why has it all but disappeared from our landscapes and dinner plates? Why is our knowledge of it limited to an old Appalachian song, "Way Down Yonder in the Paw Paw Patch"?

One big reason is loss of habitat. Paw paws are understory trees, happy in open shade under larger trees, preferably in the fertile, moist soil along riverbanks. Most land of that description was cleared and built upon long ago. (Incidentally, the trees multiply by sending out stolons, creating thickets, so "Paw Paw Patch" is horticulturally accurate.)

A second obstacle is the nature of the fruit itself. Paw paws have a very short season, and last only a few days before soft and ripe becomes overripe—but unlike many other fruits, which if harvested while still hard will continue to ripen on the shelf, paw paws will only ripen on the tree. As a result, long-distance shipping is impossible, and the fruit can only be sold where it is grown.

There have been extensive changes in the way America feeds itself. Until the mid-twentieth century, fresh food was almost entirely seasonal, but the advent of refrigerated transport changed everything. Paw paws are only in season in September, and can't compete with Florida oranges, California melons, or Hawaiian pineapples, available all year round, all over the country. The nickname "poor man's banana" didn't help; the cheap and abundant fruit came to be considered a low-status food, and we turned up our collective noses.

Another reason paw paws have become scarce is the peculiar difficulties of cultivation. Many trees, for example hollies, are either male or female, and both are needed if the female is to produce fruit. The paw paw is trioecious, meaning it forms male, female, and hermaphroditic flowers, all on the same plant. Even so, two trees, of two different varieties, are required, as the plants cannot pollinate themselves. They are 'self-incompatible.' My two are 'Sunflower' and 'American Gold.' Let's hope they become friends.

Even with two varieties, I'm still not guaranteed pollination and fruit production. They're pollinated by flies, not bees, and flies are far less efficient at the job. When the maroon flowers appear in the spring, I'll probably try to hand pollinate the ones I can reach. (I'll be able to reach them for years to come: my "trees" are only 3 or 4 feet tall and the diameter of a pencil.) The process is simple: collect the pollen from one tree with a small paintbrush, and transfer it to the female flowers on the other.

An alternative method of encouraging pollination is said to be effective, but is not for the faint of heart: in order to attract as many flies as possible, thereby improving the odds, growers have been known to hang rotting meat from the branches of their paw paw trees. Eww. Had I been informed of that particular tidbit of information earlier, I might have changed my mind about the whole venture. I'm pretty sure my garden won't make the pages of any chi-chi gardening magazines, or even be included on a local garden tour, if I follow that method.

In recent years, gardeners and food historians have reawakened to the unique value of this native fruit tree. Some communities are promoting paw paw-themed events and experimenting with new recipes. How about us? Is there a pathway to economic development by becoming the paw paw capital of Connecticut, home to a September paw paw festival?

Count me in…but my trees will be vegetarian.