



# Planting and Caring Pawpaw Trees (Paw Paw)



Pawpaw trees are native to our area of Michigan and produce unusual, large fruit. The fruits are often described as “custardy”, with a tropical flavor resembling a mixture of banana, mango, and pineapple. Pawpaw fruits are a favorite of small mammals, which can lead to poor harvests.

- **Soils and Site:** Pawpaws are naturally an understory tree, and therefore require partial shade for at least the few years of establishment. After this, more sunlight may lead to higher fruit production. Many soils can support fruit trees. Good drainage is important for pawpaw tree growth, **do not plant trees in areas that have standing water at any time of year.** These fruit trees also prefer slightly acid soils with a range of 5.5-7 being ideal.
- **Planting:** Make sure to plant trees away from structures, septic systems, and utilities. The old rule of thumb is, “Dig a \$10.00 hole for a \$5.00 tree.” When you plant your tree, dig a large hole in the same way one would with non-fruiting trees. Place your tree in the hole and spread the roots out. Transplanting pawpaw trees can be difficult, because they have a much less fibrous root system than other fruit trees. Be careful to avoid breaking roots and, when available, maintain the soil it arrives in. Loosen soil around roots, but place the entire soil ball into the ground. Do not allow a root to circle the edge of the hole, especially in heavier soils. These roots may grow in circles in the hole and limit or choke the tree. Prune off any badly damaged roots or branches. Fill the hole in carefully, taking care to eliminate any air pockets. The graft union should be at least 2 inches above the soil surface to prevent the tree from rooting from the scion (top of the tree). Tamp the soil down firmly to get good root to soil contact. Water your tree right away, and apply 2-3 gallons a week for the first year during dry weather. Adding a layer of mulch such as wood chips will help keep weeds under control and the soil moist. Always apply mulch in a “doughnut” around the tree, leaving space around the trunk to avoid rot. Placing some kind of guard around the trunk helps keep mice, rabbits or other animals from chewing bark off the tree, especially in the winter. Fences or other protection may also be needed for deer.
- **Fertilizing:** Applying one cup of a balanced fertilizer such as 12-12-12 will help get the tree started. Fertilizing annually in the spring will ensure good tree growth and fruit set. Do not apply high nitrogen fertilizers in the late summer or fall as this may stimulate tender growth which may be damaged in the winter. Always spread fertilizers all the way around the tree’s drip line, under the canopy, avoid placement directly on the tree. For any fertilizer use, always follow the directions on the label for application.
- **Pollination:** Pollination of pawpaw trees is difficult, as the female portion of the flower matures long before pollen is ready. Because of this, two genetically different trees are the minimum

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needed to pollinate, though hand pollination may be necessary. Pawpaws, unlike other fruit trees, are pollinated by flies, which are far less reliable than other trees or bees.

- **Pruning and Training:** Pawpaw trees are best pruned in later winter and early spring. Pawpaw trees produce the most fruit on new growth, meaning that these annual trimmings will stimulate new growth and larger harvests. The best type of pruning for pawpaws is to remove any broken, interfering, dead, or diseased branches from the tree, which can create more vigor.
- **Pests and Diseases:** There are few pests of any great importance to the pawpaw in our area. Some larvae may produce wilting in flowers or leaves, and some fungi may produce dark spots on fruits. The only pest that ever occurs in large enough quantities to cause issues is the larvae of *Talponia plummeriana* moth which in bad years can harm nearly all blossoms on the tree. Monitoring the fluctuation of this pest is generally advised. Be very cautious of applying products containing imazapyr in the vicinity of trees, shrubs and other desirable plants. Imazapyr is an active ingredient in many herbicide products including a variety of Roundups (Extended Control/365). Imazapyr persists for a year or more in soil, it is important to understand that planting seeds or transplants into imazapyr-contaminated soil may result in harm to these plants. Please check the label of any “icide” and always follow the directions for application.