

Wildflower in Focus

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Pawpaw

Asimina triloba (L.) Dunal
Custard-Apple Family (*Annonaceae*)



The pawpaw is the only member of the largely tropical custard-apple family that is indigenous to Maryland and northeastern North America. Pawpaw fruit, which ripens in early fall, is a cross between a banana and mango in taste and texture. Other common names for the plant include "West Virginia banana" and "Indiana banana." The spring flowers, appearing before and with the young leaves, are equally as intriguing, blooming along streams and rivers and in moist rich woodlands. According to Montgomery County Department of Parks forest ecologist and MNPS board member Carole Bergmann, pawpaw has become more common in Montgomery County, Maryland during recent years as deer don't browse

it as voraciously as they do many other woody plants. Pawpaw serves as the principal host plant for the zebra swallowtail butterfly.

Flowers: Purple, maroon or brownish. Slightly drooping and somewhat bell-like with 2 layers of 3 petals (6 in all). The outer 3 petals curve backwards. Petals are ovate or nearly round; flowers 1 - 2" across, borne along the branchlets.



Pawpaw flower. Photo courtesy Melanie Choukas-Bradley

Fruit: Greenish-yellow banana-like berry, 2 - 6" long. Edible, delicious. Favored by humans, bears, raccoons, opossums and wild turkeys.

Leaves: Simple, alternate, deciduous, 6 - 12" long with an entire margin, abruptly pointed apex and wedge-shaped base. Large leaves are tropical-looking.

Growth Habit: Small tree or tall shrub.

Twigs: Slender, brown, pubescent when young, with dark reddish-brown woolly winter buds. The terminal bud resembles a small paint brush.

Habitat and Range: Moist woods, streamsides, riversides; scattered distribution in southern Ontario and eastern U.S. from New York to Florida, west to Nebraska and Texas.

Herbal Lore: Steven Foster and James Duke describe a somewhat contradictory herbal profile in **Peterson Field Guides' Field Guide to Medicinal Plants: Eastern and Central North America**: "Fruit edible, delicious; also a laxative.

Leaves insecticidal, diuretic; applied to abscesses. Seeds emetic, narcotic (produce stupor). The powdered seeds, formerly applied to the heads of children to control lice, have insecticidal properties. Warning: Seeds toxic. Leaves may cause rash."

Similar Species: In the absence of flowers and fruit, could be confused with the umbrella magnolia (*Magnolia tripetala*).

Blooming Time: March - May.

Fruiting Time: Fruit matures in early autumn.

Locations: Rock Creek Park, C & O Canal National Historical Park, Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, Hoyles Mill Conservation Park, Wheaton Regional Park, Sugarloaf Mountain along Bear Branch and Bennett Creek, Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary and other parks along the Patuxent River.

MNPS Board President Cris Fleming and Board Members Carole Bergmann and Karyn Molines contributed to this write-up. "Wildflower in Focus" is adapted from **An Illustrated Guide to Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350 Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland** (Choukas-Bradley and Brown, paperback edition, 2008, University of Virginia Press).