

# WHERE, OH, WHERE IS PRETTY or POOR or DEAR LITTLE NELLIE?

by  
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Where indeed? Sometimes this question, well known to folksingers, scouts, and individuals in their 50's and 60's, is asked about Susie, Sally, or Lisa. But whatever her name, she's always pretty, and the answer always puts her "way down yonder in the pawpaw patch." I recently met a gentleman and he said that as a boy, growing up in California, he sang "Way down yonder in the pawpaw patch." He had never seen a pawpaw as a boy since pawpaws are not native to California.

What is a pawpaw anyway? The pawpaw, Asimina triloba, is the largest edible fruit that is native to the Continental United States. The pawpaw has many regional names –

Indian banana	Indiana banana
Michigan banana	Possumhaw
Dog-banana	false banana
Custard-apple	Hoosier banana
Ozark banana	Poor-man's banana
Wild banana	Prairie banana
Nebraska banana	Midwest banana
Woodland banana	Missouri banana

There was a local name for pawpaw about everywhere. I like to refer to pawpaw as "Ohio's first fruit" or "the forgotten fruit."

Fossil records of *Asimina triloba* – pawpaw - has been found in New Jersey dating back to 15 million years and in Mississippi from between 45 million to 55 million years ago (*American Horticulturist*, February 1995, p. 30).

The first written record of pawpaws is found in the journals of the Spanish explorer, Hernando de Soto in 1541. He and his men met Native Americans who were said to be eating and cultivating pawpaws for its fruit. His journal stated that the fruit had “a verie good smell and an excellent taste.” It was also reported that Native Americans used the bark of the pawpaw trees for making fishing nets.

The first mention of pawpaws in English may be that in John Lawson’s 1709 Natural History of Carolina. “The papau is not a large tree. I think I never saw one a foot through, but has the broadest leaf of any tree in the woods, and bears an apple about the bigness of a hen’s egg, yellow, soft, and as sweet as anything can well be. They [the Indians] make rare puddings of this fruit. The apple contains a large stone” (Lembke, p. 136).

Major Benjamin Sites, on November 16, 1787, pushed off from Limestone, now Maysville, KY with the first company of settlers – twenty six men, women, and children, mostly from New Jersey. After two days of travel, they arrived at the mouth of the Little Miami River. “They cleared a pawpaw thicket and began raising a blockhouse.” That settlement was named, Columbia, and is the present Lunken airport (Havighurst, p. 108).

Publications of the company [Scioto Company] described a New World park in *A Prospectus pour l'établissement sur les rivières d'Ohio et de Scioto en Amérique* [1789] was aimed a prospective investors and emigrants alike. This come-on quoted explorers, travelers and the chief geographer of the United States on the fertility of the soil, the abundance of resources, the ideal climate. To speculators there was a promise that the land would double in eight years. For potential settlers the district was described as abounding in game and ready to support any number of hogs and cattle. A pair of swine, it promised, would multiple to 200 in a year or so; the colony could export 30,000 barrels of pork by the end of the first season. There were vast fields of rice, 'which by nature here produces spontaneously,' waiting to be harvested. Maple trees dripped sugar, a swamp plant (cattail) yielded candles, and custard grew on a shrub (the pawpaw tree) in the forest.

The next time that we find pawpaws in a published document was Patrick Gass's firsthand account of the Lewis and Clark expedition, published in 1807, a full seven years before the official record was issued, spoke of getting "a great many papaws, a fruit in great abundance on the Missouri from the river Platte to its mouth" (Lembke, p 136).

The next written record containing a reference to the pawpaw was by Lewis and Clark on their expedition in 1806. "By September 18, the party was within 150 miles of the settlements. It had run entirely out of provisions and trade goods. Other than the cooking kettles, the scientific instruments, and some tools, it had no manufactured goods – except rifles. It had plenty of those, and powder and lead, and there was some game in the neighborhood, but the almost daily passage of trader's boats had caused the deer and bear to move back from the river...."

“There were plenty of ripe plums, which the men called “pawpaws.’ Gathering a few bushels was the work of a few minutes only. The men told the captains ‘they could live very well on the pawpaws.’ The captains were even more anxious than the men to get on, so there were no halts to hunt.”

John James Audubon painted the yellow-billed cuckoo on a native pawpaw tree about 1827 (*Horticultural Reviews*, Vol. 31, p. 351). Audubon used the winter terminal bud of the pawpaw as his paint brushes.

In the book, Blue Jacket, Warrior of the Shawnees, the author states: “The Eastern Native American tribes cultivated the pawpaw for its fruit, spreading the tree from the Ohio River Valley south to Florida by planting seeds as they traveled.” The fruits were made into cakes and then dried for use by hunters as portable food. The fibrous inner bark of the tree was used as cord to string fish, a practice adopted by the early colonists. The Native Americans also used the fibrous inner bark for weaving baskets and as a type of cloth (*American Horticulturist*, February 1995, p. 31). The seeds have insecticidal properties that were dried and powdered by the Native Americans. They applied them to children’s heads to control lice.

Lembke also stated that the Indians used pawpaws as a source of fiber with which to make baskets and fish nets. They strip off the bark in the spring when the sap is rising and the bark is still flexible enough to weave or bend (p 144). Havighurst reported that paddles were made from the light pawpaw wood (p. 50).

As settlers adapted to their new homeland, the pawpaw was assimilated into the fabric of rural life in the Midwest and South, serving as an emergency food source for farmers when crops failed and leaving the legacy of its name on numerous landmarks. A number of American towns – Paw Paw, West Virginia, Paw Paw, Michigan, and Paw Paw, Illinois, townships, creeks and rivers were named after the pawpaw.

Daniel Boone, Mark Twain and George Washington were reported to have been pawpaw fans (*Horticulture Reviews*, Vol 31, p.351-352).

James A. Little states in his treatise on pawpaws:

As an article of food, I can think of no fruit that is more nourishing than the pawpaw. During the season of ripening I always eat heartily of this fruit and never experienced any inconvenience from so doing. In fact it satisfies hunger when one is in need of food. In the year 1860, I was living in Southern Kansas where I assisted in laying out the town of Neosho Falls. We were confronted by the worst drought that was ever known in Kansas. It continued about eighteen months. The Neosho River dried up and ran no water for quite a while. No farm products had been raised in the country. Settlers were in a starving condition. A good many people left the country. Providentially there was one of the greatest pawpaw and nut crops ever known in the Neosho bottoms. In the fall when pawpaws were ripe a great many of the settlers partly subsisted on pecan nuts and pawpaws, of which there was a great abundance. Some of us spent a good deal of our time out in the woods with our hammers cracking nuts and eating pawpaws. Many of the settlers were from the northern and eastern states and had never seen or even heard of the pawpaw. Col. Goss who laid out the town of Neosho Falls was first to introduce the pawpaw as dessert to be eaten with cream and sugar. Indians were frequently in camp on the river and were great lovers of the pawpaw. Nature seems to have been generous in providing the Indians with one of the most delicious fruits which has not required so many years of patience and toil to improve as it did with the apple, pear, and peach. A similar condition as above stated existed in Indiana during the pioneer days.

Mr. James A. Little was probably born in the late 1830's.

During the early years of his life pawpaws were to be found in abundance in Indiana and, from his report, bore heavy crops with great regularity. Toward the end of his life, when the article was published, he deplored the clearing of the lands for agriculture and the consequent elimination of many of the native pawpaw stands. This situation has continued to the present day (1974) when it has become difficult to find extensive stands over much of the area formally occupied by the pawpaw. Mr. Benton R. Duckworth [of Greenfield, Ohio], who at his present 84 years of age is probably our oldest living contributor, tells much the same story. Since the lifetimes of these two men overlap and cover a period of approximately 135 years, it is interesting to note the changes that have taken place during this time. In the 1800's, farmers valued their stands of this native tree for its fruit, while now the government agencies list the pawpaw as a weed tree and urge that it be eliminated by any means at their disposal. It is difficult to conceive how this can possibly be construed as progress. This lack of native stands from which to harvest the fruit may eventually lead to the planting of groves and the coming of age of a new orchard crop for future men of vision.... ("California Rare Fruit Growers Yearbook," 1974, p. 143).

During the famous Hatfield and McCoy feud along the Kentucky – West Virginia border, in 1882, three sons of Randolph McCoy were tied to pawpaw bushes and executed by the rival Hatfield family – “pawpaw-patch execution...” In 2002, two grandsons of Randolph McCoy were seeking access to the cemetery where five of Randolph's 16 children are buried. The five are the only occupants of the cemetery.

In 1916, Ohio was recognized for producing superior pawpaw fruit. It was then that the American Genetic Association's *Journal of Heredity* sponsored a Best Pawpaw Contest. Ohio had three of the top seven entries. The best fruit received by the Contest was from a tree in Ironton, Ohio.

There is little documentation regarding the development of the pawpaw industry after the 1916 contest. In fact, pawpaws were grown commercially in the United States until around WWII.

The current interest in pawpaws began in 1990 at Kentucky State University with a research program. In 1993, there were only 19 cultivars available. There are now over 40 cultivars available, and an ever-expanding body of research on the breeding and cultivation of the species. 1993 saw the Pawpaw Regional Variety Trials initiated by Neal Peterson. This involved 10 cultivars and 18 seedling selections, planted at 14 locations throughout the continental United States. The trial is intended to evaluate selections and evaluate the potential of pawpaw fruit for commercial production.

There have been two International Pawpaw Conferences held. The first was held at the Western Maryland Research and Education Center, Keedysville, Maryland in 1994. The second International Pawpaw Conference was held in 2001 at Kentucky State University, Frankfort, Kentucky.

Pawpaws have been receiving more and more attention the last few years by landscapers for the superior quality of the tree and chefs for the unusual qualities of the fruit. In 2000, pawpaw was named, “landscape tree of the Year, by Better Homes and Gardens Magazine. And in 2005, the Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association as one of its “landscape trees” of the year chose the pawpaw. Their comments, “the pawpaw plant’s natural resistance to bugs and predators such as grazing whitetail deer make it a perfect choice for any landscape” and said that we need to “plant more pawpaws.” The year 2004

brought yet another recognition for the fruit. Pawpaw was accepted for the Ark of Taste. The Ark of Taste is a part of Slow Food, an organization of 65,000 plus members in 45 countries. The Ark of Taste identifies gastronomically desirable regional foods that are disappearing in today's world. Once a food has been accepted for the Ark, it's the job of designated members of Slow Food to devise a way to increase an awareness of the product, and to help create markets for it.

Originating in North America, pawpaws have a prominent place in history. They provided sustenance to Native Americans and many early European explorers. As a commercial food source, landscape plant, backyard fruit tree, source of medicinal compounds, and in butterfly gardens, as a food source for the zebra swallowtail, pawpaws are many things to many people.

Neal Peterson, founder of the Pawpaw Foundation, states that "...no one could have been aware back then that the pawpaw wins out handily over the peach, the apple, and the grape in just about every nutritional category. It's low in moisture, relatively high in protein, and high in carbohydrates and food energy. An excellent source of vitamin C, it also contains A, thiamine, riboflavin, and niacin. In the mineral department, it abounds in potassium, calcium, phosphorus, and iron, and when it comes to the essential amino acids, the pawpaw ranks right up there with the perfect egg white. A fruit for all appetites, a wonder fruit indeed – except for the blunt fact that although apples, peaches, and grapes lose to the pawpaw in the comparative nutrition stakes, they win the prize of availability every time" (Lembke, p 141).

In conclusion, I hope that I have answered the question: how has a tree bearing the largest fruit native to North America – a tree noted in 1541 by Spanish explorer, Hernado de Soto, whose fruit reputedly once saved Lewis and Clark from starvation and which has about a dozen towns, rivers, creeks, and other landmarks named after it -- come to be known to most Americans only through a curious reference in a whimsical folk song.

In 1905, James A. Little wrote:

We can never realize what a great blessing the pawpaw was to the first settlers while they were clearing the great natural forest and preparing to build cabins.

Planting fruit trees was rather an experiment for a number of years. The pawpaws, and a few other wild fruits of less value, were all their dependence so far as fruit is concerned. Well do I remember sixty or more years ago my father would take his gun and basket and go to the woods and return in the evening loaded with pawpaws, young squirrels and sometimes mushrooms of which he was very fond. But there will never be a recurrence of those days which were the happiest of my life (*A Treatise on the PawPaw*, unknown page).