





# Pawpaw PALOOZA

Educators, students and farmers celebrate  
the native Kentucky fruit

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BY ABBY LAUB  
PHOTOS BY WALES HUNTER

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**I**magine Lewis and Clark not completing their return trip to St. Louis in 1806. Thanks in part to pawpaws, the expedition was successfully concluded.

“There is a lot of history with pawpaws,” says Kentucky State University horticulture research and Extension associate Sheri Crabtree. “Thomas Jefferson and George Washington both liked to eat pawpaw fruit; and on the Lewis and Clark expedition, when they were on their trip back and on the verge of starvation, they survived on pawpaws for a while in the Missouri area. They [the fruit] saved the expedition from starvation.”

The pawpaw is native to most of the eastern United States—all the way from northern Florida to southern New York and a little bit west of the Mississippi River. It might not be well-known to the general public, but the pawpaw is the largest edible fruit native to the United States and is indigenous to 26 states.

Pawpaws have a custard-like texture and an unusual flavor often described as a blend of mango and banana. Crabtree says the pawpaw is the only temperate version of a tropical family of trees and that some pawpaws even have flavors reminiscent of pineapple with hints of coconut and caramel.

The fruit, which resembles a green potato and averages a half-pound in size (but can reach up to 2 pounds), is easy to miss. “Trees in the wild don’t have a lot of fruit on them,” Crabtree says. “Most people have probably seen



Sheri Crabtree

them and not realized it.” North American pawpaw trees have an open-growth habit, are part of the shady understory of the forest, and often are found along streams. They also can be grown in orchards under full sun like apple trees. Pawpaw trees require little care and don’t need much pruning or spraying. They can grow to 20 feet tall if left unpruned.

“A lot of people grew up eating them in the wild, just going out in the woods and collecting them and usually just eating them fresh,” says Crabtree. “I think they would be considered an heirloom crop. It’s something people ate in the past just collecting wild fruit.”

In the early 20th century, the pawpaw was primed to take off as a crop. In 1916, the American Genetics Association held a best pawpaw contest that generated significant interest, and it was believed a commercial pawpaw industry would develop. However, the fruit is highly perishable and therefore difficult to ship and store. According to Crabtree, another fruit rose in prominence over the pawpaw due to its superior shelf life: blueberries.

Breeding continued during the ensuing decades, and interest in pawpaws resurged beginning in the 1980s. In 1990, two contests were held to choose the best pawpaws. One was conducted by a Kentucky State University horticulturist, Brett Callaway, and was intended to gather germplasm needed to start a breeding program. Today, KSU has the only full-time pawpaw research program in the world and works to develop the pawpaw as a commercial fruit crop.

The KSU team, led by Dr. Kirk Pomper, is responsible for outreach to farmers and universities around the world. KSU even has hosted several international pawpaw conferences dedicated to discussion about pawpaw production and usage.

“At KSU, we focus on small, limited-resource farmers and lesser-known, unique niche crops,” Crabtree says. “The University of Kentucky works more with the big crops. We try to focus on these lesser-known crops and have a focus on sustainable agriculture. And since the pawpaw is native here and doesn’t require a lot of pesticides or maintenance, it is a good fit.”

KSU’s research and demonstration farm in Franklin County also is home to the USDA National Clonal Germplasm Repository, a collection of pawpaw species. The farm has approximately 1,200 pawpaw trees, consisting of about 40 cultivars and advanced selections, and seedlings collected from 12 states across the pawpaw’s native range. Twelve of the KSU farm’s 205 acres host a pawpaw orchard—where the trees produce more fruit than they would growing in the wild—and propagation research is conducted in greenhouses. KSU students study genetic diversity in the pawpaw and learn molecular biology techniques, which are important for careers in the biomedical field.

The KSU research program in the past has looked at improving the fruit’s shelf life, but now is focusing more on processing the pawpaw into pulp (removing the fruit’s large, brown seeds and bitter outer skin). “You can freeze the pawpaw and use them in other products,” Crabtree says. “We are developing value-added products.” She says KSU also is working to connect farmers with more retail and wholesale outlets.

The fruit can be used to make jams, preserves and ice cream and also is good as a substitute for bananas in dishes

such as breads and puddings (thus spawning the common names “poor man’s banana” and “Kentucky banana”). Kentucky pawpaw harvest season typically is late August through mid-October, and the fruit most likely can be found at farmers markets and roadside markets.

**Roland McIntosh** has been growing pawpaws on his farm for about 30 years and has more than 100 trees. Though his main crop is tomatoes, he says annually he probably sells about 700 to 800 pounds of pawpaws. When selling the fruit at the farmers market, he often is asked what it is. He says his pawpaws are used in some high-end restaurants in Lexington, where the fruit makes its way into sauces, mixed drinks, sorbet and ice cream.

Although his favorite way to eat pawpaws is in his wife’s sweet pawpaw bread, McIntosh says if you want to eat a pawpaw raw, just pick it off the tree, peel and serve. He likens the flavor to a pineapple-mango mix. Since the growing season is short, most of McIntosh’s customers buy and freeze the fruit. People also buy trees from him to plant in their own backyards and, in four to six years, the trees will bear fruit. McIntosh, who took over his father’s farm, says the subtropical tree will grow just about anywhere and that this year’s crop looks like it will be a good one since

## VINTED

Reader **Marsha Wyzykowski** of Bowling Green enjoys her pawpaws in vino form. “Reid’s (Livery) Winery has some of the best and most unique wines I have ever tasted,” she says. “One that might top the list is a pawpaw wine called ‘Wild Thing’ that is both unique and truly Kentucky.”

there were no major frost events when the trees flowered earlier this year.

**Dr. Ilze Sillers** is another Kentucky pawpaw grower who followed a different path to the farm industry. Her primary occupation

is as a psychologist, and she continues to do consulting even at nearly 70. Born in Riga, Latvia, she moved to the States with her parents as a child and landed on a farm in

## NUTRITIONAL PUNCH

Not only are pawpaws tropically delicious, according to KSU’s pawpaw webpages ([pawpaw.kysu.edu](http://pawpaw.kysu.edu)), the native Kentucky fruit also is nutritious.

Pawpaws:

- Have three times as much vitamin C as apples and twice as much as bananas.
- Have higher protein and fat content than bananas, apples or oranges.
- Are high in magnesium, iron, copper and manganese and are a good source of potassium and several essential amino acids.
- Contain significant amounts of riboflavin, niacin, calcium, zinc and phosphorus.

Tennessee. “I loved my early memories of living on the farm and dreamed of owning my own farm someday,” she says. “That dream came true about 22 years ago when I bought my farm in Woodford County.”

Sillers was introduced to pawpaws through KSU’s Third Thursday Thing, a monthly training workshop on sustainable production practices that has been held at the KSU Research Farm since 1997.

“I decided on the pawpaws because they were a native fruit to Kentucky, were as nutritious as a banana, did not require the use of pesticides, and tasted and smelled delicious,” Sillers says. “I currently sell my fresh fruit to Good Foods Co-op [in Lexington], my frozen pulp to WildSide Winery here in Woodford County—pawpaw makes a great wine—and seeds to Northwoods Nursery in Oregon. This year, I will also have some seedlings for sale.”





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## HAUTE PAWPAP

Pawpaws get the gourmet treatment in seasonal dishes by Kentucky chefs such as country ham-wrapped halibut with pawpaw habanero butter (pictured) by Chef **Anthony Lamas** of Sevice in Louisville, and Chef **Jonathan Lundy's** (Jonathan at Gratz Park) prosciutto-wrapped scallops with vanilla pawpaw preserves.

## COOL AND CREAMY

Sheri Crabtree of KSU's pawpaw research program shares the following recipe for pawpaw ice cream. Additional pawpaw recipes, including pies, cakes, breads and cookies, can be found at [pawpaw.kysu.edu/Recipes.htm](http://pawpaw.kysu.edu/Recipes.htm).

1½ cups pureed pawpaw pulp  
3 cups sugar  
4 cups milk  
4 cups cream

Blend together ingredients using a food processor or blender. Freeze in an ice cream freezer according to manufacturer's instructions. This is for a gallon-sized ice cream maker, so the ingredient amounts should be reduced if using a small, countertop home ice cream maker.

## FIELD DAY

On Sept. 13, a pawpaw field day will be held at the Kentucky State University Center for Sustainability of Farms and Families at the KSU Research and Demonstration Farm in Frankfort. The event, held from 10 a.m. – 3 p.m., is part of KSU's Third Thursday Thing, a monthly sustainable agriculture workshop series, and will provide small and beginning farmers information on pawpaw processing and value-added products. For more information, call (502) 597-6437 or visit [organic.kysu.edu/TTTSchedule.shtml](http://organic.kysu.edu/TTTSchedule.shtml). The TTT program also shares information via Facebook and Twitter (@ThirdThurThing).

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