



## Perfect Pawpaws

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*Native to tropical America, these highly productive plants provide an abundance of fruit for very little effort. Pawpaws (*Carica papaya*) can easily be accommodated in even the smallest garden, as they do not occupy very much space. They have a shallow root system that does not invade pipes and foundations and they thrive in the sheltered protection of buildings. For a more tropical effect, use them as an upper storey planting to create a light-filtering canopy for more delicate shrubs and tropical foliage plants. Pawpaws will thrive in any sunny, well-drained soil and frost-free position.*



### Good For You

These delicious fruits are a good source of vitamins A and C and iron, and consumption is known to aid digestion. In addition, pawpaws have various medicinal and other uses. Remarkable healing qualities are attributed to pawpaw creams. The leaves and green fruit contain the enzyme papain, which is used as a meat tenderiser. Papain can even be applied topically to relieve insect bites. Pawpaws also contain the substance retinene that has been identified as having anti-cancer properties.

### Sorting out the Sexes

Pawpaws are available as male, female and bisexual or hermaphrodite plants. All appear outwardly similar in appearance. Male plants produce flowers on stalks ranging from 60cm to 1metre in length. Female and bisexual plants produce flowers in the axils of the leaves or on short stalks. One male plant can pollinate eight or more female plants. Bisexual plants are self-pollinating. Some male plants do produce fruit. And while these may be quite tasty they are generally inferior in quality and size.

### Growing From Seed

Pawpaws are grown from seed. Seed is best harvested from a good performing, locally grown variety. Wash the seeds thoroughly to remove the pulp and membrane and sow directly into prepared soil or into pots filled with seed raising mixture or compost. Seeds germinate very easy with seed grown plants producing fruit in twelve months or less. Seed from female plants will produce both male and female seedling offspring. Seed from bisexual plants tend to produce bisexual offspring.

### Versatile Plants

Although typically consumed fresh, pawpaw can be dried or pureed and made into wonderful chutney and sauce. Pawpaws vary considerably in flavour from the strong taste associated with yellow fleshed varieties to the milder taste of pink/orange fleshed, more tropical varieties. Unripe fruit can be used as a vegetable or grated for use in salads. Even the seeds are edible.

### Nutrition Boosts Fruit Numbers

Pawpaws are very heavy feeders and it is important that they receive adequate supplies of nitrogen, potassium and trace elements. Light applications of organic fertiliser, decomposed animal manure and compost should be applied at regular intervals. Decomposed animal manure and compost should supply adequate amounts of trace elements such as boron, but rock dust and additional trace element mixes can also be applied if required.

Avoid using excess quantities of rich fertiliser or animal manure at any one time as these can burn the tender root system. This allows fungus diseases to enter the roots and





bring about the eventual demise of the tree. Yearly applications of Dolomite lime, wood ash or other alkaline material are beneficial. Fruit size tends to deteriorate in older trees, particularly if nutritional requirements are not met.

Life expectancy of pawpaw trees varies according to climate and soil type in which they are grown. In tropical regions plants grow quickly but are short lived often falling victim to root rot disease over the wet season. In protected positions and well-drained soil in subtropical regions, plants may remain productive for six or more years.

#### **Common Pest Problems**

A range of fungus diseases affects pawpaw leaves and fruit. Powdery mildew and black spot attack all parts of the plant during winter in subtropical regions. Applications of copper based products, wettable sulphur or organic fungicides based on potassium bicarbonate such as Eco-Rose can minimise damage. Ripe fruit rots are common during humid weather. Regular use of seaweed sprays and balanced nutrition are a significant factor in minimising disease outbreaks.

Fruit development is retarded during cold weather and any fruit that does ripen during this time, may not be as tasty as summer ripened fruit. Heat, sunshine adequate nutrition and varietal selection are the best guarantee for a sweet, flavoursome fruit. Harvest fruit when they begin to show good colour and continue the ripening process indoors and out of the reach of possums and flying foxes.

#### **Home Grown Champagne?**

Fruit of the babaco plant are available at certain times of the year through supermarkets and green grocers. Often sold under the name champagne fruit, the flavour is refreshing with a slight fizz. Babaco is thought to be a hybrid between two different species of pawpaw. This self-pollinating plant is more cold tolerant than other varieties, but is very subject to root rot disease and requires absolutely perfect drainage.