

# Fruit for the Ages

**Paw Paws** have been around a long time. The first Paw Paw fossils date back to the last Polar Ice Age, when saber-toothed cats, woolly mammoths, and American mastodons roamed.

Large, glossy Paw Paw seeds were actually distributed by fruit-eating megafauna—giant animals that thrived during Earth’s glacial period.

Native Americans used the fibrous inner bark of the Paw Paw to make fishing nets, ropes, and mats. They strung fish to dry with Paw Paw string and ate the fruit fresh, dried, and in sauces and cakes. In the 1500s, Spanish explorers observed Native Americans planting groves of Paw Paws along rivers.

Settlers also enjoyed North America’s largest native fruit. They ate Paw Paws fresh or cooked into pies, preserves, custard, breads, cakes, and even wine. Explorers Lewis and Clark grazed on Paw Paws as they journeyed west. Enslaved Americans foraged for the fruit to augment



*To find Paw Paw trees at the Arboretum, cross the first woodland bridge and you’ll spy a red sign marking a small grove. Need help with identification?*

**Watch our introduction to Paw Paw video.**

meager rations, as did freedom seekers traveling north along the Underground Railroad.

Folks from the Ozarks and the Appalachians associated Paw Paws with witchcraft, and young girls would make charms from Paw Paw twigs. During the Great Depression, Paw Paws became known as “The Poor Man’s Banana,” providing free foraging for families who could not afford to buy fresh fruit. More recently, organic growers have looked to Paw Paws for their orchards: the native fruit has few to no pests.

## TASTE TEST

*Have you ever eaten a Paw Paw? Many people have compared the taste to mangoes, bananas, and papayas.*

- Paw Paws ripen from late August through early October. Gently shake the tree; ripe fruit will fall to the ground and be soft to the touch.
- If you are lucky enough to find a ripe Paw Paw at the Arboretum, please take only one so that other hikers—and animals—have a chance to sample, too.
- Wash your Paw Paw and, with an adult’s help, use a sharp knife to gently slice it lengthwise. Scoop out the flesh with a spoon. Be careful not to eat the seeds or the skin! Both can irritate your stomach.

*What do you think Paw Paws taste like?*



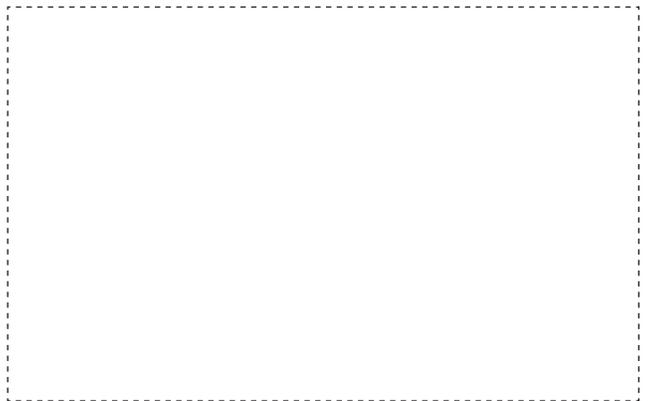
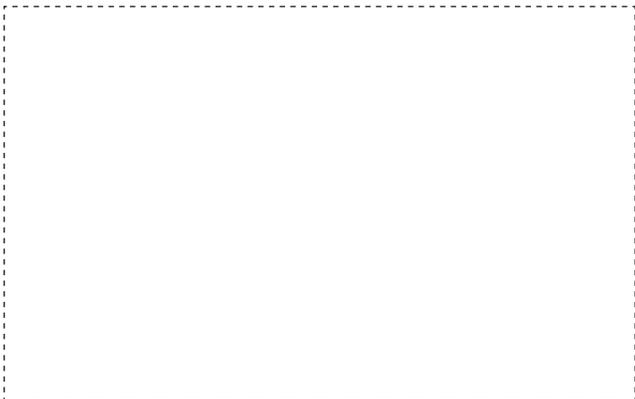
**Can’t make it to the Arboretum and don’t have Paw Paw trees nearby?** Use our history of Paw Paw template on the following page to create a timeline of Paw Paw history.

PHOTO: SCHOOLHOUSE FARMHOUSE STUDIO

**POLAR ICE  
AGE**

**HISTORY OF THE  
PAW PAW**

Label the timeline using the information from the previous page. Add drawings to illustrate each entry.



**PRESENT DAY**

# Tropical Roots



When members of a 16th-century Portuguese expedition to America referred to *Asimina triloba* as “**Paw Paw**” because of its resemblance to the tropical papaya fruit, they weren’t far off.

The Paw Paw is the northernmost member of the Annonaceae family, which primarily grows in the tropics. Although native to North America, the Paw Paw shares many characteristics of tropical plants, including its pollination strategy. The small maroon flower of the Paw Paw—which blooms in early spring—smells faintly of rotting meat to attract its primary pollinators, carrion beetles and blowflies.

The palm-like leaves of the Paw Paw have tropical characteristics, too. At nearly a foot in length, they wick away water with the help of special “drip tips.” Many tropical plants use this adaptation to discourage fungal growth.

How did such a tropical plant end up in North America? Since the first Paw Paws appeared on earth some 50 million years ago, intermittent periods of global warming led to the



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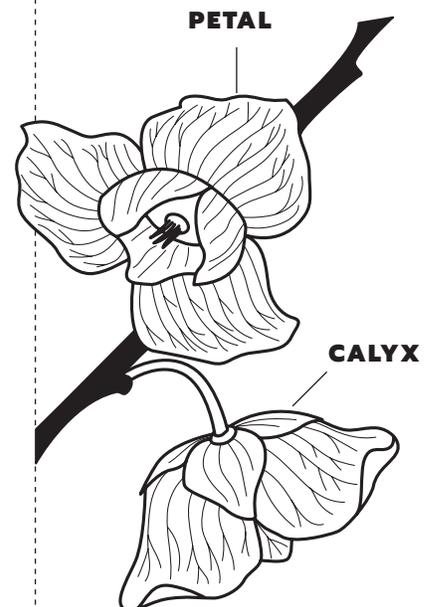
expansion of tropical areas, consequently expanding the range of tropical plants. The movement of fruit-eating megafauna may have spread Paw Paw seeds northward, too.

Bring a ruler or measuring tape with you on your next Arboretum walk. Look for the biggest Paw Paw leaf you can find. Use your ruler to measure the leaf, then sketch it—true to size—in your nature journal (you might need two pages.) While you’re at it, measure the leaves of other types of trees. How do they measure up to the Paw Paw?

## NAME GAME

*If Paw Paws were named after papayas, where did the scientific name *Asimina triloba* come from?*

“*Asimina*” is derived from the Algonquian word/s for fruit or berry. “*Triloba*” refers to the arrangement of petals in whorls of threes and the number of calices.



**Can’t make it to the Arboretum?** *Observe flowers in your yard or on a neighborhood walk. Sketch them in your nature journal. Older children can look up flower parts and label their drawings.*

PHOTO: KATJA SCHULZ/CC BY-2.0 (TOP), ILLUSTRATION: SCHOOLHOUSE FARMHOUSE STUDIO (RIGHT)



# What's the Story?

Reaching no more than thirty-five feet in height, **Paw Paws** are understory trees.

The understory of a forest is made up of the plants that grow between the canopy and the forest floor—small trees, vines, shrubs, and the saplings of larger trees.

Understory plants start their growth early in the spring, taking advantage of sunlight that will become more dappled once canopy leaves emerge. Temperatures remain fairly steady in the shady understory, creating prime habitat for a variety of plants and animals, including shade-loving mosses, ferns, and fungi.

Different animals thrive in different layers of the forest. Squirrels build their nests in

the canopy, while songbirds nest in the understory. Insects warm themselves in the leaf litter that blankets the forest floor. Each layer of the forest contributes to the ecosystem as a whole; remove one, and everything would topple.

On your next Arboretum visit, take a walk along the Lower Blockston Branch to observe colonies of Paw Paws. Sit on a bench (you'll find one by the second bridge) and use your senses to fully experience the forest understory. In your nature journal, divide a page into four parts and record what you see, hear, smell, and feel. Use words and pictures!



*At the Arboretum, walk along the Lower Blockston Branch to observe colonies of Paw Paws. Need help with identification? **Watch our introduction to Paw Paw video.***

## ROOT RELATED

Many understory plants, including Paw Paws, reproduce not only by seed but by clonal growth. This is when roots send up new shoots—called suckers—that are still connected underground, making them clones of a single parent plant.



### Can't make it to the Arboretum?

*Try this root experiment at home.*



1. Slice an inch off the top (wider part) of a fresh carrot from your garden or the store.
2. Stick two toothpicks on either side of the carrot; use these to balance the carrot on a small glass.
3. Fill the glass with water just to the base of the carrot.
4. Place in a sunny window.
5. Refill the water as needed so that there's always water touching the carrot's base.
6. After a few days, you will see roots and shoots emerging from your carrot!

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