



Chronicle

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PAW PAWS

The Michigan Banana

By Barbara J. Barton

It is funny how songs we heard as children stick with us all our lives. If you search through your memories, you may find a little folk tune hiding amongst the cobwebs: “Pickin’ up paw paws, put ’em in your pocket; Pickin’ up paw paws, put ’em in your pocket; Pickin’ up paw paws, put ’em in your pocket; Way down yonder in the paw paw patch!”

Of course, that song refers to Michigan’s largest native fruit, the paw paw (*Asimina triloba*), also known as the “Michigan banana.” Those potato-shaped fruits, which can grow as large as your fist, have a creamy texture and a taste some describe as a cross between a banana and a mango. Their flavor profile makes sense considering that they belong to the tropical custard apple family.

When paw paws ripen in the early fall, they must either be shaken out of trees or gathered from the ground after they

drop naturally. The Potawatomi call them *bebaya*, which means “the ones that are lying about.” Fresh paw paw fruits cannot be stored for long and must be eaten right away or made into jams or jellies. Fortunately, they can also be frozen for later use.

Michigan is at the northern edge of the paw paw’s range in the United States. Paw paw trees are mostly found in the state’s southern counties, living in the understory of bottomland forests with moist, rich soils.

There are two theories about how paw paws dispersed across the land over time. The first theory involves dung. During the Pleistocene epoch—also known as the “Ice Age,” defined as the time period from about 2.6 million to 11,700 years ago—mammoths, mastodons, and other large mammals may have roamed around in paw paw country. Some researchers believe that only mammals as big as those could



*Several paw paw fruits that have not yet fallen naturally to the forest floor.
(Both photos courtesy of the author.)*

swallow the large fruits and eliminate the kidney bean-size seeds in their excrement, effectively planting new trees as they wandered.

But those animals became extinct, so how would the orphan paw paw trees survive without their dispersers? A second theory proposes that Indigenous peoples planted the seeds throughout Michigan and beyond, greatly expanding the species’ range.

Paw paws were abundant in certain parts of Michigan in the mid-1800s and became the namesakes for several lakes in Berrien, Hillsdale, and Kalamazoo Counties. Perhaps the most well-known namesake is the village of Paw Paw in Van Buren County, which sits along the shore of the Paw Paw River. Sadly, most of the town’s paw paw trees have disappeared due to land development in the area.

In the early twentieth century, Michigan farmers began planting orchards of paw paw trees. Today, there are more than 60 varieties found in markets around the country, which are helping people rediscover the “Michigan banana.” ☒

Barbara J. Barton is a Lansing-based wild-foods forager, author, and singer-songwriter.

Baskets of paw paws that have been collected in Michigan.

