

## Two Unique Trees: Sassafras & Pawpaw

By Susan Camp

Trees hold a special fascination for me. I marvel at their strength and fortitude to withstand harsh weather in any season. I value their provision of habitat and food for mammals, birds, and insects. I enjoy resting in their shade in the summer heat. The grace and beauty of their leaves and branches refreshes me.

Tall oaks, pines, sycamores, and tulip poplars are familiar to most of us. Understory trees that grow at the edges of the woods, such as dogwood and redbud, are commonly seen on the Middle Peninsula. Serviceberry or Juneberry is a lovely, small tree, sometimes seen in yards and gardens, as is fringe tree, with its feathery, white blossoms in springtime. Crape myrtle is popular for its summer color, both in private yards and commercial landscapes.

Sassafras and pawpaw are less well-known trees that were commonly found in rural areas in the past. Both trees are native to the eastern and central United States and provide food and shelter for a variety of wildlife. Both have unique, interesting, common names.

The sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) was prized by early colonists as a cure-all, and roots and bark were shipped to England for their medicinal properties. Sassafras tea was enjoyed for many years and sassafras roots were used to flavor root beer. Sassafras roots contain safrole, a chemical compound that was found to be a weak carcinogen in rats. Safrole has been banned by the FDA and is no longer used in the soft drink, tea, and cosmetic industries, but you don't have to make tea or soap to enjoy the sassafras tree. Sassafras grows well in the acid soils (pH 5-6.5) of our region, achieving a height of 60 to 70 feet. The leaves are unique in that they can be oval, bilobed or mitten-shaped, or trilobed, all on the same tree. Fall color is yellow or orange. All parts of the tree are fragrant. Leaves and bark provide food for deer, rabbits, wild turkeys, and other wildlife. Birds eat the blue-black, late summer fruits and disperse the seeds.

The pawpaw or papaw (*Asimina triloba*) is another native North American tree. The pawpaw is related to tropical trees in the custard-apple family, but not to the Central American papaya (*Carica papaya*), also known as pawpaw. Pawpaws reach a height of about 30 feet and tend to be shrubby. They spread by root-suckering, and often are found in clumps or thickets. Various flies and beetles act as pollinators. The larvae of the zebra swallowtail butterfly eat the young leaves. The unique aspect of the pawpaw is its fruit, which ripens in late September to mid October. The pawpaw fruit is a 6 inch long berry that tastes like rich, sweet custard. The pawpaw is not a pretty tree, but there has been interest in recent years in cultivating it as a food crop; however, the fruit spoils quickly unless it is frozen. It can be eaten raw, baked in desserts, or blended into ice cream. The flavor is described as a mixture of tropical fruits.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 430-026 "Trees for Problem Landscape Sites –Wet and Dry Sites" offers information on planting trees in our environment and lists of trees for

both wet and dry sites. VCE Publication 438-105 “Specialty Crop Profile: Pawpaw” provides an overview of the issues involved in planting pawpaw trees as a food crop.

Both the sassafras and pawpaw trees are easy to grow and relatively pest and disease free. They provide food and shelter for wildlife, and have long, interesting histories of use by Native Americans and early settlers alike.

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