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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 93-12 / November 1993

Gene Silberhorn

Paw Paw

Asimina triloba (L.) Dunal.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Asimina triloba is a shrub or small tree with simple, large (15 to 23 cm long & 8 to 15 cm wide), alternate leaves with smooth (entire) margins. Twigs, terminal buds and the under side of the leaves are rusty pubescent. Lower branches and trunks have a smooth-grey bark that is more evident after leaf-fall. The most unique and diagnostic characteristics of paw paw are its large (2 to 3 cm wide), solitary, fleshy, purple flowers and large (4 to 10 cm long), thick, fleshy, edible fruits. The leaves are similar in size and arrangement to deciduous magnolias, but the fruits and flowers are very dissimilar.

The pendulous flower is evident from April to May in coastal Virginia and the fruit (paw paw) matures in late September to October. The fleshy part of the fruit (mesocarp) is aromatic and flavorful. Making up much of the volume and weight of the fruit are several large, flattened, dark-brown seeds. Wildlife competition is keen for the paw paws, so humans are usually the last to notice the few fruits that may remain after fall foraging. *Asimina* leaves usually turn a pale-yellow in autumn. Winter recognition of *Asimina* is possible by close observation of the rusty-brown terminal buds and branchlets.

Distribution

Paw paw is found in wooded areas in North America from New York and southern Ontario, west to eastern Nebraska, south along the Mississippi Drainage, the Appalachian Highlands and the Atlantic Seaboard to the Gulf of Mexico.

Habitat

Asimina triloba is nearly always found as an understory shrub or small tree in broad-leaved, deciduous-dominated forests. In some regions along the Atlantic Seaboard, paw paw is not considered to be a wetland affiliated plant. In coastal Virginia, however, it is often found along the upper margin of the flood plain of small stream-forested wetlands. Large mature stands of paw paw are frequent along the natural levee of Lake Drummond in the Great Dismal Swamp. Common overstory trees associated with *Asimina* are tulip popular (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), ashes (*Fraxinus* spp.), American elm (*Ulmus americana*), and sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*). Vegetative ground cover is often sparse due to shade under dense paw paw stands.

Ecological Values/Benefits

Asimina triloba can be found in several nontidal forested wetlands. The broad range of ecological values attributable to forested wetlands in general may be applied to this species. Nontidal wetlands function as natural filters of high nutrient loads which often originate from agricultural lands, as well as sediment runoff, pesticide and herbicide residues and other potential toxins. They also serve as wildlife habitat. Specifically, the fleshy paw paw is relished by raccoons, opossums, black bear and other mammals, as well as birds.

Hydrophytic Factor/Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia (1988)*, *Asimina triloba* is classified as a **facultative upland plant (FACU)**. FACUs are plants that usually occur in nonwetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%), but are occasionally found in wetlands (estimated probability 1%-33%).

Asimina triloba (L.) Dunal.



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*Illustration by
Karen Podd*

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recycled paper.* ♻️