

## THE PAW PAW

### A Tropical Fruit in the Iowa River Valley

BY ANNA WILSON

Tom Wahl loves many things that grow and that are unusual. Much of what he produces on Red Fern Farm, near Wapello is unique. Wahl's interest in sustainable agriculture led him to create a biodiverse farm where persimmons, chestnut, and hazelnut trees surround goats, and heritage turkeys. (See *Edible Iowa River Valley*, Fall, 2007 for more about Wahl's turkeys)

Wahl has carefully searched out each crop, fitting it together in an intricate puzzle, which he hopes will minimize pests and disease. But no discovery was ever as sweet to him as the paw paw.

Fifteen years ago on the shore of nearby Lake Odessa, Wahl found a wild paw paw tree with fruit growing on the top. He shook the tree and tasted the wild fruit. "They are the best tasting fruit I've ever encountered in my life," said Wahl of the paw paw. "That's what got me interested in paw paws."

Wahl's has seven test paw paw trees growing outside his farmhouse door. Each tree was grafted from trees throughout the United States. Related to the custard apple, paw paws were once a prairie staple and were abundant enough to be the subject of their own song, but were seldom cultivated outside the mid-south.

The heirloom fruit became less popular in the last century, and up until recently, few knew of the raw fruit's custard-like texture, which differs between varieties, but reminds most first-timers of tropical flavors. Wahl describes their "impossible to describe taste" as a combination of banana, pineapple and cantaloupe. Wahl's wife, Kathy, uses the fruit in lieu of bananas in most recipes, since paw paw-specific recipes are as hard to come by as the fruit itself. But, Wahl always keeps one of his favorite concoctions—paw paw oatmeal bars—on hand.

Wahl is committed to doing what he can to increase the paw paw's popularity. Iowa is the northern boundary of the tree's prime growing requirements of deep, fertile and well-drained soil and Wahl has more than 200 trees in production on a nearby acreage. They are deciduous, and can grow approximately 20 feet tall, producing burgundy colored flowers. The fruit can be three to five inches long.

Wahl's trees are expected to produce commercially in two years. While he buys some of his stock, other trees are grafted from wild varieties. He also sells the trees, when they are available, from his farm. They must be bought in pairs, since they come in male and female versions and they need each other to reproduce.

"Growth from buds is genetically identical to the original [tree]," said Wahl, "Grafted varieties are generally better than wild varieties."

For the time being, however, it may be that growing your own is the only way to get paw paws. The fruit travels poorly so don't expect to see it in grocery stores. While growers could make it available at farmers markets, most, like Wahl, are overwhelmed with requests from high-end restaurants.

If growing your own isn't an option, Wahl said there are "many hundreds of pounds" of paw paws along the Iowa River between Wapello and Columbus Junction. The problem? Since trees don't really like strong winds, they thrive better in spots sheltered from Western drafts and often, the only way to get to the wild fruit orchards is by boating or hiking to the location.



Tom Wahl, owner of Red Fern Farm, shows off paw paw fruit on his farm near Wapello, Iowa. There are 28 varieties of the sweet fruit which grow on small trees.

#### PAW PAW OATMEAL BARS

- 1 ½ cups whole wheat flour
- 1 ½ cups quick or rolled oats
- 1 cup brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¾ cup butter
- 1 – 2 cups paw paw purée

Stir together flour, oats, sugar and soda. Cut in butter till crumbly. Pat ⅓ of the mixture into the bottom of a 13 x 9 x 2 inch ungreased pan. Spread puree on top. Sprinkle on remaining crumbs. Bake at 375° for 25 – 30 minutes. Cool and cut. Makes around 30 bars.

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