Pawpaw seedlings

Blackford Valley Farm | Planting guide

Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) is a native, small fruit tree with rich, soft fruit. These are **seedlings**, including seed described as “improved,” rather than grafted copies of a named cultivar. Fruit size, flavor, and bearing age will vary.

Site and growth

- **Space and light:** Allow roughly **15–25 feet** for a mature small tree. Give young, short plants temporary shade from harsh afternoon sun during establishment; as they grow, full sun gives the strongest fruit production. Permanent deep shade can limit crops.
- **Soil and pH:** Choose fertile, moisture-retentive but **well-drained, acidic** soil. Missouri's orchard guidance gives **pH 5.5-6.5**, a cultivation target rather than a hard survival limit. Good surface and internal drainage matter: occasional wetness is tolerated, but permanently wet soil is unsuitable. A specific clay preference is not established by these references; inspect its structure and drainage rather than judging texture alone. Pawpaw is not drought tolerant. Test before adding lime; alkaline ground is not the preferred site.
- **Climate:** Pawpaw can grow in much of the Midwest, but winter hardiness and fruit ripening depend on the seed source and local season. Check the USDA hardiness zone for the planting address.

Roots, water, and soil risks

Give roots an aerated, penetrable soil profile; shallow rock, compaction, or a high water table reduces usable rooting space. Root suckers can form a patch, but connected suckers do not supply genetically different pollen. Occasional wet conditions are not the same as permanent saturation: waterlogged roots lose oxygen and can decline or die. A dry, exposed site is also a poor choice for this moisture-loving tree.

Check soil beneath the mulch during establishment, especially the first two summers. Water slowly when the root zone begins drying, wetting the planted roots and surrounding soil, then let excess drain; do not keep a planting hole continuously soaked. Established trees need less intensive attention, but prolonged drought and competition can still limit growth and fruit development. Fertile, drained soil with dependable moisture supports a larger healthy canopy and fruit growth; light, compatible pollen, weather, and seedling genetics still control the crop. Soil stress is not a diagnosis of a particular disease.

Planting for fruit

Plant at least **two genetically different seedlings** nearby for cross-pollination; a larger grouping improves the odds of overlapping flowers and fruit set. Pawpaw flowers are visited by flies and beetles, so flowering alone does not guarantee a crop. Seedlings can take **several years, sometimes up to about ten**, to bear. “Improved” seed is still genetically variable and does not reproduce its parent exactly.

Plant your potted seedling

We sell and recommend **potted seedlings**. Our planting method requires a **square hole, not a round one**. A wider hole is preferred, not required; it must fit the root ball without squeezing it. Dig no deeper than the root ball in its pot, and shallower as needed to leave the **top of the root ball slightly above surrounding ground level**. Rest it on firm soil so it does not settle too deep. Water the pot before removal; support the root ball, not the stem, and keep it together. Check for circling roots rather than forcing a root-bound ball into the hole. Backfill around the sides with native soil, taper soil to cover exposed side roots, and water thoroughly. Keep the root flare exposed; do not pile soil or mulch over the ball's top or against the trunk. Check both the root ball and nearby soil for moisture while roots establish.

Protect and establish

In places with deer, rabbits, mice, or voles, **physical protection is nearly essential** while plants are small. A well-staked, ventilated tree tube can shelter a single stem and provide some early shade. Keep it from overheating and inspect it regularly. Seat and secure its base to exclude rabbits and small rodents; voles can tunnel under a loose tube and girdle the stem. Keep grass and weeds away from the base, mulch without touching the trunk, and water through drought. A tall cage with a fine-mesh lower guard is another option. Deer usually avoid pawpaw foliage, but that does not protect a young planting from other damage.

Harvest and use

Ripe fruit bruises easily and keeps only a short time. Pawpaw works best where someone can pick and use fruit promptly. It suits a home orchard, a woodland edge with good light, or a diverse food-forest planting.

Learn more

Use the soil-location map to screen survey pH layers, drainage, water storage, and depth restrictions where recorded. Survey estimates describe mapped soils, not a soil test or an inspection of this planting spot. Check actual rooting depth and wetness in the field and test soil before amendments. The map does not measure current moisture or predict fruit yield.

- NC State Extension: pawpaw soil, moisture, and pollination
- NC State Extension: soil depth, aeration, pH, and nutrient availability
- University of Minnesota Extension: establishment watering and mulch
- University of Missouri Extension: growing pawpaw
- Missouri pawpaw guide: pH, internal drainage and drought sensitivity
- Penn State Extension: tree shelters and small animals