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Growing Paw Paws (*Asimina triloba*) from Seed

Seed Collection, Cleaning and Storage

Paw paw seeds are recalcitrant, meaning that if the inside dries out the seed will die. So during collection and storage, care should be taken to not allow the seeds to dry out. Surface drying is not a problem. Seeds should be collected from healthy and ripe fruit. I clean seeds by eating the fruit and spitting out the seeds, but you can clean them by hand too. Fermenting uncleaned seeds for a few days in water helps to free them from the little membrane they grow in. In USDA zones 7 – 9 uncleaned paw paw seeds should be ok being sown directly into the soil as they ripen, provided they get 100+ days of cool (around 40f or below) over the winter, this may also risk losing seeds to animals. Further north it's probably best to clean them and store artificially. Once seeds are clean they can be given a light bath in bleach water or hydrogen peroxide, then rinsed in clean water, this is optional but protects from rot in storage. Seeds should be stored in the refrigerator or root cellar, mixed with lightly dampened peat, saw dust or clean sand and stored in a sealed container. Check once in awhile for signs of mold or rot. If problems arise, re-clean seeds and move to a clean container with fresh damp medium. Seeds need ~100 days of cool temps before they can be moved to germination conditions.

Planting

Paw paws are highly tap root dominant plants and this should be taken into consideration when planting, either sow directly in soil or plant in a container 12" deep or deeper. Paw paws in USDA zones 4-6 seem to benefit from protection during their first winter, so growing in containers is probably a good idea. In warmer places direct sowing will accommodate the tap root and eliminate transplant issues, choose a suitable spot (see below), prepare the site by removing weeds and adding mulch, then plant around 1/2" deep and keep well watered for the first year. For container growers, select a nice deep container, treepots work well but are expensive to ship and not needed by most people. 1 or 2 liter soda bottles with drainage holes cut in the bottom are ok, but i prefer 12"+ sections of 4" plastic pipe set on a hardware cloth table so the roots air prune or a large nursery pot (3-5 gallon) or 5 gallon bucket with drainage holes sown with several seeds. For planting medium I use good, weed free compost with some sand, gravel or perlite added for drainage. Keep moist but not sopping wet. Seeds take a long time to germinate, seeds sown after the last frost in Maine aren't usually up before July, so be patient and don't give up. Keeping seeds in a warm spot (south side of a building, green house etc) helps. Once shoots emerge they need protection from direct sun. In northern climates seedlings should be grown outdoors until they lose their leaves in the fall and then stored in a sheltered spot below 40f over the winter (basement, root cellar, garage, buried in woodchips etc).

Establishment

The paradox of siting a paw paw is that for fruit production they want full sun, but young seedlings need protection from full sun. Options include, tomato cage covered in row cover, blux or other grow tubes, planting near tall perennials, planting near a tree that will be cut later and many others. Paw paws like deep, loamy soil if possible. They like being near water, but do not like to grow in saturated soil (think river bottom, not swamp). A heavy organic mulch helps minimize weeds and water issues. Despite their huge tap root, young paw paws are not particularly drought tolerant, so a nice deep watering once in while is helpful to establishment. If they get wilted, water deeply. For proper pollination plant at least 2 paw paws in any given area, spaced 10-20' apart. Seedling paw paws typically start bearing fruit in 5-10 years depending on conditions. Don't worry if they grow slowly at first, they are just building strong roots! Good luck!