

JOHNNY APPLESEED

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I don't know exactly how the legend of Johnny Appleseed became imprinted on my brain but the way I remember it, Johnny Appleseed traveled through the countryside eating apples and throwing the cores over his shoulder. He spread apple trees in places where they had never grown before. In truth, he was a nurseryman who planted orchards.

I have always had the most immense respect for the way nature takes care of herself. It has always amazed me that plants have a way of ensuring their own survival. Left to their own devices, plants will reproduce at the right time in the right conditions. At the same time, I have a deep respect for the art of horticulture. My grandfather was a world-renowned nurseryman and he made the world a more beautiful place by cultivating plants. As a gardener, I like to walk the middle path. Although I do not march across fields throwing apples over my shoulder and I am not a nurserywoman, I do like to try various methods of propagation.

For a long time pawpaws were on my "to do" list. The pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) is the largest edible fruit that grows in the United States and the only species of *Asimina* that grows in Maryland. Historically, Native Americans, colonists, and foragers have sought the fruits as a nutritious food source. The fruits ripen in September and October. They contain vitamins A and C, amino acids, as well as potassium, phosphorus and magnesium. If you have never eaten the fruits, the custard like flesh tastes like a cross between banana and mango. While we humans can survive without them, the zebra swallowtail butterfly cannot. The zebra swallowtail and pawpaws coevolved. Plants in the genus *Asimina* are the only plants on which females can lay their eggs.

With all of this in mind, I was motivated to try my hand at growing them. I planned to order potted plants from a nursery but before I had a chance to do that a neighbor shared some of his cultivated pawpaw fruits. After savoring the custard inside, I decided to try growing the seeds two different ways. The first attempt was to mimic the legend as I remember it from my childhood: Johnny Appleseed method number one. I threw a handful of seeds over my shoulder at the top of the bank along the creek. Pawpaws like soil that drains well and provides adequate moisture. They can tolerate both sun and shade and naturally grow along waterways. They require more than one tree to set fruit so I was pleased to see that three had germinated.

I saved the second handful of seeds for Johnny Appleseed method number two: propagating the seeds myself. Like many woody plants whose seeds ripen in the fall, pawpaws require a cold treatment called stratification. The seeds must be clean, remain moist, and have a minimum of ninety days of cold treatment. I put them in damp sand and placed them in the fridge for the winter.

In the spring I planned to pot them up in 12" deep pots because the emerging root (the radical) is delicate and easily damaged. I didn't know if there would be enough room on the heating mats. If so, I would see them emerge in about fourteen days. If not, I'd have to wait a month.

I never got to see if I had enough room on the heating mat because my seeds went missing. I don't know what happened but I suspect that my husband may have thought the bag contained my son's night crawlers.

My efforts at propagating the seeds myself were not so successful but I am not discouraged. I get a thrill from trying my hand at growing plants and I often learn more from my failures than I do my successes. I'm glad that I tried growing pawpaws both ways and I will definitely try both methods again. The legend of Johnny Appleseed, as I remembered it, inspired me to throw a couple seeds over my shoulder. I am so glad I did because in this round Johnny Appleseed method number one was the clear winner.

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