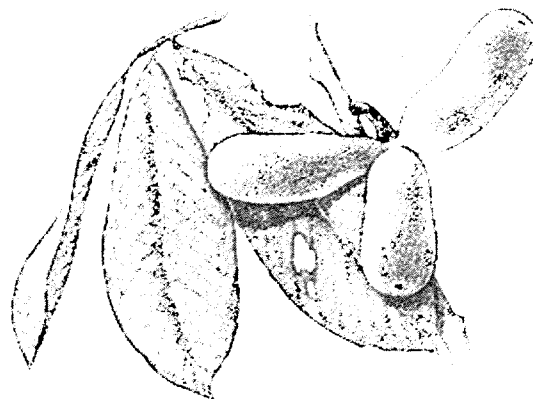
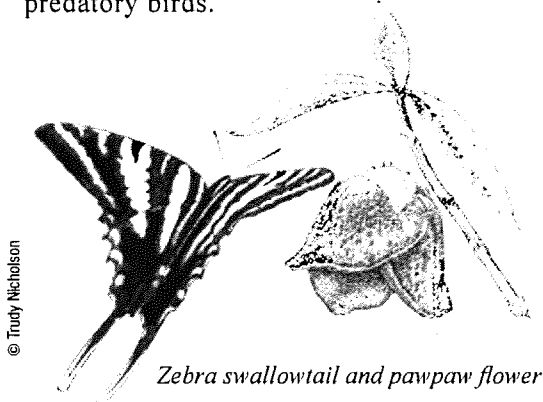


Washington and Jefferson's Favorite Fruit

A lovely black-and-white butterfly with a touch of red in its wings searches through a grove of pawpaw trees on the banks of the Potomac. The female zebra swallowtail is particular about where to place her single egg. She must find a pawpaw leaf uninhabited by the eggs of another. All this fuss for good reason: the first brightly colored caterpillar to hatch out will cannibalize any other zebra swallowtail eggs it finds on the same leaf. The caterpillars also feed on the leaf itself which contains a natural insecticide that renders it and adult butterflies inedible to predatory birds.



Pawpaw leaves and fruit




© Trudy Nicholson

Zebra swallowtail and pawpaw flower

The pawpaw has its own interesting story. It's a member of the soursop family, the Annonaceae, and its ripe fruit was reported to

be the favorite dessert of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The pawpaw is our only representative of a large family of tropical trees most commonly found in the Amazon and Borneo. A common and low-growing tree that borders the towpath, it sports the most unusual flowers and fruits, reminiscent of the tropics. The flowers are deep purple and smell slightly of rotting meat, similar to many tropical plants that are pollinated by carrion flies. The giant fruit can reach six inches in length and weigh up to 16 ounces making it the largest fleshy fruit produced by any North American tree.

Some Cabin John hunter-gatherers prize pawpaw fruit, but it was likely first eaten and its seeds dispersed by much larger fruit-eaters—the giant mammals of the Pleistocene era. Its original dispersers are extinct now and today, the tree spreads largely by root suckers in open areas along the river.

Any warm morning in May offers an excellent chance to see the zebra swallowtail. The pawpaw fruits don't ripen until late August or early September. The ripe fruit tastes like a cross between banana and mango. Handle these treasures gently, as they bruise easily, and eat within three days to seek the same pleasure Washington and Jefferson experienced. —

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