

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

You never know what you'll find growing in Northwest Arkansas. Many readers of the Free Weekly have prosperous backyard gardens, or even urban farms with chickens, vegetables, fruit orchards and herbs. Adventurous gardeners have grown banana trees and avocados in their homes, and now, Steven Skattebo of Fayetteville has grown a papaya tree – and enjoyed its delicious fruits!

The papaya is native to Mexico and northern South America, and is cultivated in many different tropical and subtropical regions of the world, including Florida, Hawaii, California and Texas. Usually, tropical fruiting plants like papaya, pineapple, and other varieties Steven has grown would not survive or do very well in Northwest Arkansas. "I'm benefiting from global warming," Steven joked on Facebook.

According to his wife, Nora, the seedling sprouted up unexpectedly from the compost pile in 2016. It grew 3 unripe papayas, which remained dormant for quite awhile. Around Halloween, they transferred it inside for the winter to save it from freezing. It lost leaves and looked as if it would die, but new leaves grew, and in February of 2017 the first fruit had ripened. It was sweet, and had no seeds, she said. In spring, they moved the tree outside. In July, a second papaya had ripened. It was also very sweet, and had black seeds. The couple is celebrating their 26th wedding anniversary September 28th, and looking forward to more papayas!

It's possible to grow papaya trees in containers, and they're considered easy to grow. Trees come in male, female, and hermaphrodite varieties – you'll need to plant that last one if you only intend to have one tree, because it's self-pollinating. A large pot of 15-20 gallons with good drainage placed in a sunny spot is required. They usually fruit for a few years before needing to be replaced. For details, visit BalconyGardenWeb.com

If you don't have room indoors or own a greenhouse, it will be difficult to grow a papaya tree because of frost and winter cold. However, you might plant a few pawpaw trees (*Asimina triloba*), which are native to this area and produce fruit with varying flavors similar to mango and banana. It's often called the "prairie banana." Our native zebra swallowtail butterfly larvae feed exclusively on pawpaw leaves as it is their host plant. According to Wikipedia, "Chilled pawpaw fruit was a favorite dessert of George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson planted it at his home in Virginia, Monticello. The Lewis and Clark Expedition sometimes subsisted on pawpaws during their travels." Its appeal to backyard gardeners has grown in recent years because it's easy to maintain.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.