

Chautauqua Watershed Notes  
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy  
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**Two Little Known Trees of the Chautauqua Watershed**  
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Pawpaw flowers are striking due to large size and deep maroon color.

Finding a plant that is unfamiliar to me is much like stumbling across an unexpected treasure. For this reason, I thought I'd share a little information about a couple of understory trees that you may not have noticed during your adventures in the Chautauqua Watershed.

Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*), also known as dog-banana, is a small tree whose slender trunks reach only about 25-30 feet tall in most settings. This species occurs in the understory of floodplain forests and rich bottomlands. Flowers appear either just before or during the time that new leaves appear in spring, and are striking because of their large size and deep maroon color. The flowers produce a somewhat unpleasant odor that attracts flies and beetles that serve as pollinators.

Pawpaw trees often produce sprouts from roots just a few feet from the trunk, and in this way, a dense patch of pawpaw that is a clone of one individual can form. The flowers cannot self-pollinate, however, and must be pollinated by an unrelated tree, not a member of the same clone. For this reason, large clones may produce few fruits. When pollinated, however, a real treasure appears.

A single flower can produce many fruits that have a complex tropical flavor and are the largest edible fruit native to our country. The fruit is technically a berry, but looks more like a mango or a very plump banana due to the yellow-green color that is sometimes freckled when ripe. The yellow flesh is custard-like and very nutritious. Additionally, pawpaw leaves and twigs contain substances that may soon yield anti-cancer drugs or may be useful as a pesticide. For these

reasons, pawpaw's commercial potential is currently under investigation. Though common elsewhere, this tree is rare in New York State and is designated a threatened species by the State.

Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) is another small tree, but this species occurs in moist forests and the edges of woodlands, pastures, hedgerows, and fields, and reaches an average height of about 35 feet. One of the things I find most delightful about sassafras, is that the leaves come in three different shapes: some are simple ovals, some have two lobes, and some have only one lobe giving them the appearance of a mitten. The leaves turn multiple beautiful shades of yellow, orange and red in the fall making this a welcome addition to the visual landscape.

The flowers emerge in spring before the leaves and are bright yellow. The fruit is a dark, shiny blue drupe that is borne in a red cup attached to a red stalk which is held upright, and they are a valuable source of nutrients for wildlife. The leaves, twigs, and roots all have a spicy-sweet aroma when crushed and have been used to make tea and were the origins for the flavor of the ever-popular "root beer." As a folk medicine, the tea has been used to cure ailments such as colds, and oil produced from root bark purportedly soothes muscular aches and reduces high blood pressure. Although it is uncommon in our region, it is more prevalent in the eastern portion of the state and thus is designated a secure and common species.

These are just two of the countless treasures awaiting you as you explore our rich region. I hope you are lucky enough to come across one or both of these species when you visit a protected portion of the Chautauqua Watershed.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake's shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its 2009 annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake's most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. Please contact the Conservancy at 716-664-2166 to join for 2009!