

January Jewel 2008 – The Papaya

Carica papaya, originally from Central America, is one of the easiest fruits to grow in Florida. It is very high in vitamins and minerals, and the enzyme papain that it contains aids digestion. For that reason, it makes a wonderful dessert, though I especially like to eat it for breakfast.



The papaya and the babaco, or mountain papaya, are the only well known species in the family Caricaceae. Although there are over 70 species of closely related herbaceous trees in this family scattered all through the mountains of South America, the only plant you're likely to have in your garden that's even distantly related to the papaya is broccoli. Once you try growing papayas, you'll find they're as easy as broccoli, and almost as fast! Like vegetables, they're almost always grown from seed, and under ideal conditions will produce fruit in less than a year.

Ideal conditions are: full sun, rich, fertile soil with regular water and fertilizer, and no hard freezes in the winter

Most gardening guides will tell you that you need a male and a female tree in order to get fruit. I have never found a male tree to be necessary. Every papaya I've ever grown has had both male and female flowers on it, though some have had nearly all female flowers, which is great for fruit production. I have seen all male trees in other people's gardens, and they're quite a waste of space. Most people don't realize that their tree will never produce fruit, and they allow it to get bigger and bigger waiting for something to happen. If you see long, dangling clusters of yellow flowers on your papaya, cut it down and throw it in the compost! The flowers on female or mixed trees are white, and very fragrant. If you plant 3 of these, the few male flowers they contain are enough to pollinate all the female flowers on your property, and provide you with more fruit than you can possibly eat.



As with any food producing plant in Florida, there are pests to watch out for. The papaya fruit fly looks like a small wasp with a very long stinger, which is actually its ovipositor. It inserts the ovipositor deep into the fruit, where it lays its eggs. You'll know this has happened when you see a milky white sap oozing from small holes on the green fruit. As the fruit ripens, the larvae eat their way out, and the fruit starts to spoil around the holes they make. I have found that a product called Crop Surround, actually an ultra-fine clay, is very effective at stopping the fruit flies from piercing the skin of the fruit. I've also found that if I plant lots of papayas, the fruit flies aren't able to lay their eggs in all of them. One final way around the fruit fly problem is to use your papayas while they're still green. They make a great cooked vegetable, similar to squash!