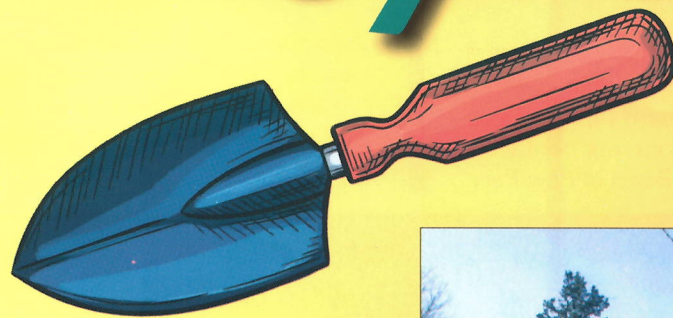


Beauty duty



Paw Paw may not be the biggest community, but it's always growing, and the Lee County village owes it all to members of the Paw Paw Garden Club

For a community named after a fruit-bearing tree, it's only fitting that plants play a big role in making Paw Paw a place its residents can be proud of.

Whether it's up or down Chicago Road or at Paw Paw's parks, the flowers and plants throughout the village are a sight to see, and it's all thanks to the community's garden club.

The Paw Paw Garden Club is small – at just eight members – but this group of green thumbs do an impressive job keeping the community they live in and love looking its best.

Michelle Fay is the club's president and one of the founding members from when it began in 2005. She's seen plants and projects go through all different kinds of weather, and leads the task in making each year look prettier than the last.

"It gives all of us a huge sense of pride and satisfaction," Fay said of the eight women who make up the club. "We're all gardeners. I don't have a background in gardening, but I've learned throughout the years from several of my colleagues who are in the gardening business."



Paw Paw Garden Club member Joyce Bettner (left) and club president Michelle Fay work on a holiday arrangement along Chicago Road in Paw Paw. Just because the growing season takes a break for the winter doesn't mean the club does. Members keep things looking fresh and festive with decor in the dozen concrete containers throughout the village.


Story
CODY CUTTER
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MICHAEL KRABbenhoeft
For Small Town Living

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Paw Paw Garden Club members Irene Hanson (left) and Rita Luce work on an arrangement of evergreen branches in a concrete container along Chicago Road in Paw Paw.

day working on the first pot at the Community Center parking lot. Fay showed Bettner and Cidlik what she wanted the pot to look like, inviting other members to offer their own ideas if they wanted. "Gardening is very hard work, but it is also very rewarding and it makes me feel good," said Bettner, a retired computer programmer from Northern Illinois University.

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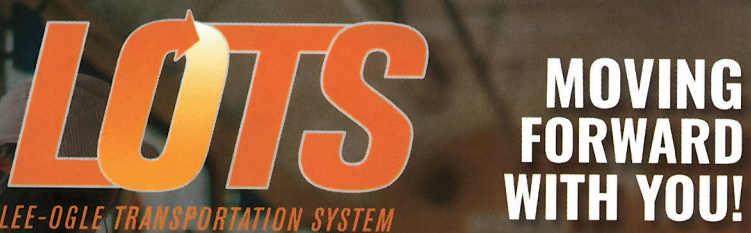
The club tends to 12 large concrete pots that dot the downtown strip, six on the north side of Chicago Road and six on the south side; and also take care of displays at both the east and west welcome signs, the bandshell, the gazebo and at Rogers Park.

And just because the growing season takes a break for the winter doesn't mean that the garden club does. Members snip a few of the plants – such as boxwoods and lime-light hydrangeas – and use them, along with branches from fir trees, to make festive displays and place them where flowers typically grow.

On Nov. 20, the club took advantage of the weather to freshen up the 2-foot high concrete pots and decorate them with greens and ornaments. They also spent a day just before Thanksgiving softening the dirt, digging and poking holes to prepare the pots for the spreading firs, plants, holiday decorations and shiny scarlet ball ornaments attached to sticks that they put inside them, along with wooden decor and long metal candy canes.

Fay, Joyce Bettner and Pat Cidlik started the

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Like Fay, Bettner also is one of the club's original members, and she's a Master Gardener through the University of Illinois Extension and shares a lot of her knowledge among the group.

"I wanted to find a group that I could socialize with because my friends were at work," Bettner said. "The Paw Paw Garden Club was part of my socialization to get to know people."

The club began beautifying the area at the welcome signs at the edge of town, and then over the years put in a flower bed at Rogers Park, followed by installations at the bandshell and gazebo.

Also at Rogers Park is a memorial garden dedicated to the life of former member Eunice Rogers.

Watering the flowers in the summer can be a challenging task. Members of the town's Leo Club – the youth chapter of the Lions Club – tend to the thirsty flowers throughout the village, and downtown merchants and businesses do their part to help keep concrete planters in tip-top shop.

Cidlik is one of the newest members, having moved to the community just a couple of years ago. She has enjoyed the camaraderie and friendships she's made so far.

"I was new in town, so I didn't know a lot of people," Cidlik said. "It was a way to get to know more people. We have a lot of fun doing it. It's rewarding."

The club raises funds for their plants each year through an annual plant sale on the first Saturday of May – "when they run the Kentucky Derby," Fay said. The club meets every February to plan its year, keeping in mind which plants work and

which ones don't in the area's climate. If it's going to be a hot year, less drier plants likely are going to be sought. This year's choices have panned out.

The coronavirus pandemic shelved this year's in-person sales, so it was done on Facebook, which turned out to be a big success, Bettner said.

"We sold more flats than we've ever sold," she said. "We had so many perennials that we were out digging our yards up, because we sold the ones that we had and they wanted more."

The response was a truly heartwarming one for the club, with so many people contributing.

"We went around to the various merchants to help the garden

club show hometown pride and beautify the town," Bettner said. "That gave the whole community a sense of pride of their hometown to go by and see the beautiful flowers that we have in the summer, and the greens in the winter

time. They can come home and see that they can be proud of where they live."

"It gives me a sense of ownership," Fay said. "Our mission of the group is to continue to beautify the community. Each one of us takes a lot of pride in what we create, and what we grow."

The next big project for the club will be to replace the large concrete planters. They've been downtown for nearly 30 years, dating back to when they were maintained by other entities in town. If the club can keep building on the successes it's already had, members will be well on their way to raising enough money for their concrete plans, and making their community a place that'll make other villages positively green with envy. ■

MORE INFO

To learn more about the Paw Paw Garden Club, or to join, call club president Michelle Fay at 815-627-2041.



A few examples of the garden club's work. TOP: One of the Paw Paw Garden Club's first endeavors was to beautify the welcome sign at the east end of town, off of Chicago Road. Here's how it looked more than a decade ago, before the sign was redesigned. **CENTER:** A memorial garden at Rogers Park, dedicated to the life of former club member Eunice Rogers. **BOTTOM:** Flowers at the bandshell in Community Park.

What is a paw paw?

The American papaw, pawpaw, paw paw, or paw-paw, is a small deciduous tree native to the eastern United States and Canada that produces a large, yellowish-green to brown fruit (seen at right). It belongs to the genus *Asimina* in the same plant family (the Annonaceae) as the custard-apple, cherimoya, sweetsop, ylang-ylang, and soursop.

The paw paw is a small, understory tree, unlikely to ever grow into the forest canopy. Despite a fruit that has a sweet, custardish flavor somewhat similar to banana, mango, and pineapple, deer tend to avoid its branches and leaves. It's the only local member of its large, mainly tropical plant

family, and produces the largest edible fruit native to North America.

Its fruits are commonly eaten raw, but are also used to make ice cream and baked desserts. However, the bark, leaves, and fruit have been documented as containing the neurotoxin annonacin, which could cause neurodegeneration.

It's even had books written about it: "Pawpaw: In Search of America's Forgotten Fruit," available from online retailers.

Sources: Wikipedia and the National Park Service (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/pawpaw.htm>)

