

# TURKEY CREEK'S PROTEAN PAW PAW

by Marcy R. Bartlett

*Asimina tetramera* is currently under review for inclusion in the Federal list of endangered or threatened species. (Dec. 15, 1980)

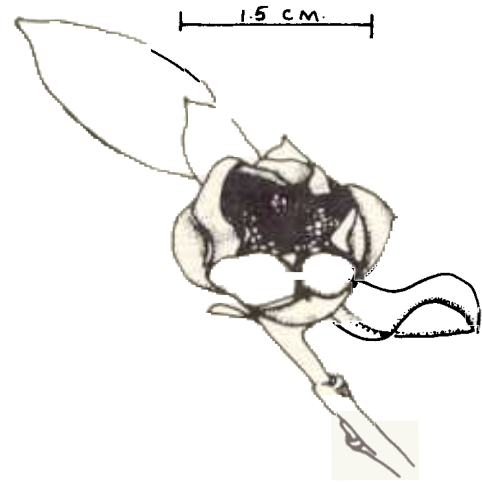
By all the rules, this drawing should be labelled *Asimina obovata*. However, read on....

Last summer Margaret Hames, of the South Brevard Chapter of the FNPS, noticed this *Asimina* and included it in the vegetative list for the newly-created Turkey Creek Sanctuary. Tentative identification made it either *obovata* or *tetramera*. My personal I.D., after six months of careful observation, would make it *A. neurotica*, for this is the most neurotic plant I've ever seen!

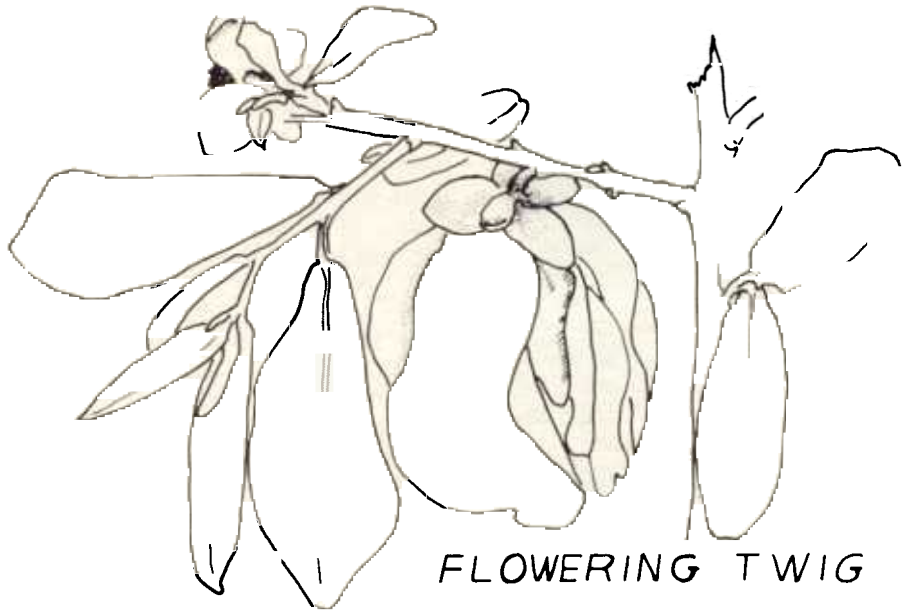
In October, some plants still had green fruit while some had already cast their shriveled fruit. In November, some were bare, but most were not. In December, a few individuals (all young and small) retained yellowed leaves. In January, at last, they were a consistent community of plants, all bare and lavender-gray. Their weird, single-plane branching looked like reptile vertebra scattered in the Turkey Creek scrub.

Now I could settle down to serious observations. Did we have only one *Asimina*? There seemed to be two growth habits. But while I painstakingly sketched branches I dared not cut, one of our friendly local 4-wheel drive destruction machines traumatized one of these double-minded shrubs and set it blooming.

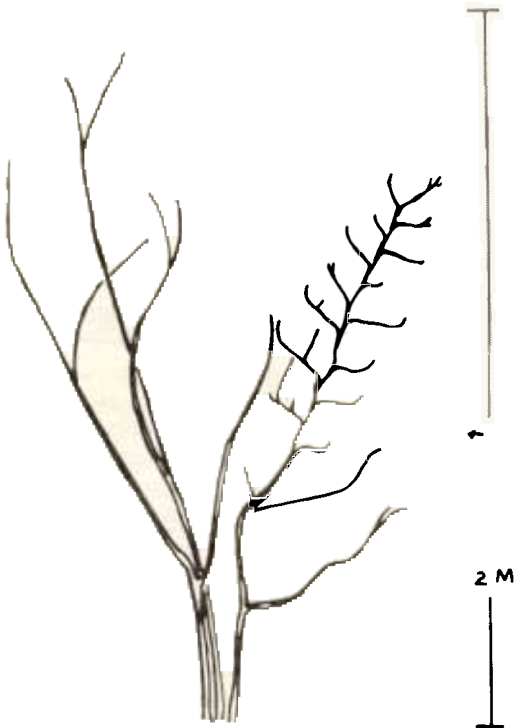
That was Ground Hog Day, and the beginning of frustrations. At this writing, April 14, the *Asimina* community in Turkey Creek encompasses everything from chubby buds covered with rusty hairs to fingery little fruits poking out of the stripped-down calyces. The blooming period has already covered two months and



FOUR PETALLED BUD



FLOWERING TWIG



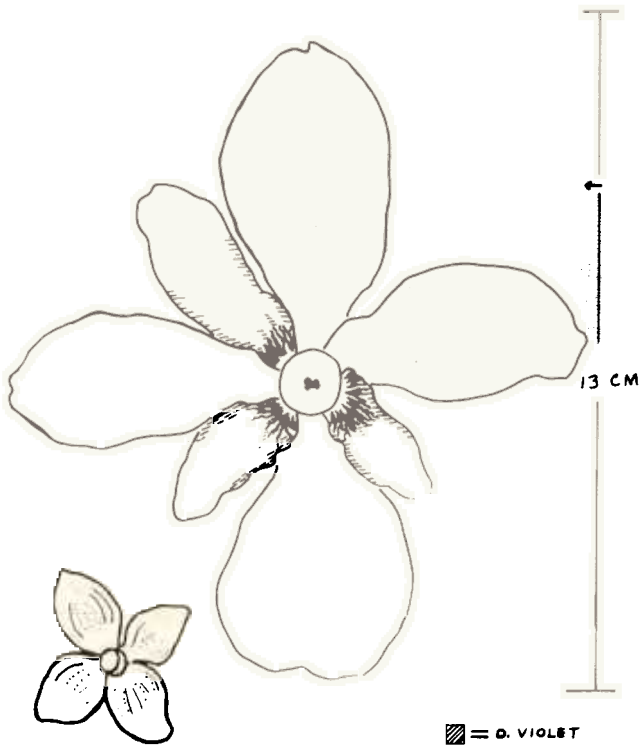
MULTIPLE TRUNKS @ SHOW  
SINGLE PLANE HABIT



shows no sign of ending.

None of these plants followed any consistent blooming plan. Flowers opened at random on any branch like children too young to "take turns." Some opened before any leaves emerged; a sudden ruffled globe in a new part of the field would announce a pawpaw I had not charted before. Paranoia began to close in on me! My children do such things to me, but a plant? A harmless, lovely, intriguing native plant?

Most of these charming neurotics currently display (simultaneously) 2-, 3- and 4-sepalled blooms. I remember carefully combing one plant to be sure it was consistent — all 3-sepals. Hur-ray, I thought, and triumphantly carried home a bloom with 3 sepals, to



SEPALS ONLY

find it had a fourth, fused, outer petal. Aargh!

Fortunately, my alcohol habit and fascination with *Lepidoptera* larvae have kept me sane. So what if this wretched plant has no hairs on the outside of its petals? (Six or more botanical references say it **should**.) So what if I can't draw a typical peduncle because the unforgiveable things range from 0.5 cm to 2.5 cm? So what if one fourth of the individual shrubs are where no self-respecting *Asimina* should be, or show the growth habit of an espalliered dwarf pear?

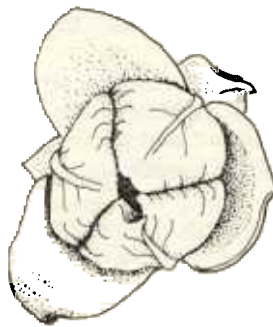
When I comfort myself in the lost hours it is with these thoughts: this neurotic plant harbors swallowtail larvae. And: they're beautiful, and they're ours.

Protean characteristics? So what? Right now, the city of Palm Bay displays impudent ruffles of bloom in some completely unexpected places. Right on!

Non-conforming? Palm Bay has everything from manatee breeding places and archeological digs to the third fastest growth rate in the state. Conformity would be inappropriate.

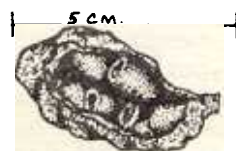
New? Surely Bartram has described this lovely jape.

The quandary is not resolved, but the drawing is finished. The botanists will write after they collect more opinions. I withhold my label.



THREE

■ = D. VIOLET



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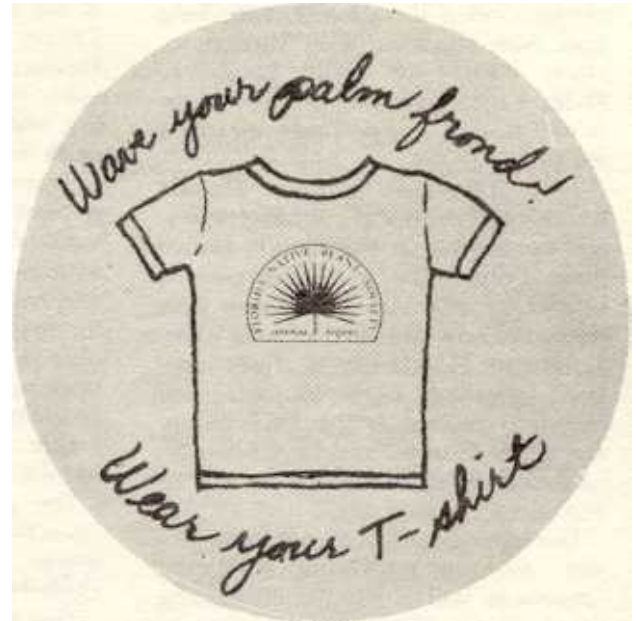
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