

Pond Apple

Anona glabra

Pond Apple is not an apple but a native tree associated with wetlands and swamps of southern Florida and the West Indies.

It belongs to the Custard Apple family (*Annonaceae*) and is related to the North American pawpaw. It is also called Alligator Apple or Monkey Apple, but not Custard Apple. As its common name suggests, this tree can grow in areas of periodic inundation from fresh, brackish, or salt water.

The Pond Apple is the only native representative of the Custard Apple family in South Florida. Among the related non-native tropical and semi-tropical fruits that have found a congenial home in southern Florida are the Sugar Apple (*Anona squamosa*), the Custard Apple (*Anona reticulata*), and the Cherimoya (*Anona cherimolia*). The black sheep of the family, Pond Apple flesh is usually palatable, but it pales in comparison to that of exotic members of its family. Humans find the fruit hard, relatively tasteless, and bitter.

From April to June, Pond Apples produce unique creamy yellow-white flowers with three fleshy outer petals and three inner petals. The inner petals have a red interior base. By mid summer, the flowers give rise to hard green pond apples which ripen to yellow-green into autumn.

The fruit is apple-sized and mango-shaped. When ripe, the thick stem pulls out of the fruit, leaving the creamy, custard-like flesh set with hard seeds next to a large central cavity. After falling, the fruit turns from green to yellow then black.

Each fruit holds 100 to 150 pumpkin-like seeds that are a little less than a half inch in length. Both fruits and seed



float and remain viable for many months. Once established in a wet or moist environment, trees grow rapidly.

The fruit is an important wildlife food, savored by raccoons. Even turtles and alligators feed on Pond Apples that fall into the water, although the carnivorous gators may mistake a bobbing Pond Apple for a Pig Frog.

Most pond apple trees top out at 30-35 feet with a relatively open, rounded, and spreading canopy. Usually single-trunked, seedlings can grow in clumps, giving the appearance of a multi-stemmed plant. Mature plants may have slightly buttressed bases. Branches start from a short trunk, and at old age Pond Apple trees become gnarled and twisted.

The upper surface of Pond Apple leaves is a light to deep-green, depending on the age, and is paler on the underside. Leaves are oval, leathery, and can be five inches or more in length. Pond Apple trees are generally semi-deciduous.

Pond Apples have other redeeming qualities. The roots are used to make bottle corks and fishing floats, and the trees are a vital component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

Three islands named Torry, Kreamer and Ritta occupy approximately 7,000 acres at the southern end of Lake Okeechobee. Prior to settlement, Torry and Kreamer were covered by dense stands of Pond Apple and native gourds



(*Cucurbita okeechobeensis*). When the islands were settled in the early 1900's, they were cleared, ditched and bermed to produce cropland. By the mid-1970's farming operations had ceased.

In 1993, the islands were identified as potential restoration targets. Goals included reestablishing natural hydrologic connections between the islands' wetland habitats and the lake, preserving gourd habitat, and increasing the number of Pond Apples and willows on the islands for nesting wading birds.

Recently, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the South Florida Water Management District completed a habitat enhancement project on Ritta Island, removing the remaining structures that had impeded the natural hydrology of the islands and removing exotic vegetation. With the current low level of Lake Okeechobee, both agencies have taken the opportunity to re-establish Pond Apple and cypress forests along the shoreline of the island.

Not everyone, however, is enamored with the admirable qualities of Pond Apples.

In Australia, Pond Apple is regarded as one of the worst weeds, one of Australia's "20 Weeds of National Significance." Introduced as grafting stock for the closely related Custard Apple, it escaped to become a hardy tree and aggressive invader, forming dense thickets and canopies that gradually replaced everything else. It is a serious threat, ironically, to native *Melaleuca* wetlands.

That, some might argue, is only poetic justice.