

The Herb Society of America's **Notable Native™ Herbal Tree 2025** *Sassafras albidum* (Nutt), Nees



Family: Lauraceae (Laurel Family)
Latinized Name: *Sassafras albidum* (Nutt.), Nees
Common Names: Sassafras, Mitten Tree
Growth: Deciduous perennial
Habitat: Open woodlands, roadsides, hedgerows
Light: Full sun to Full shade
Soil: Slightly acidic, moderately moist, well-draining
Water: Moderate rainfall, tolerates some drought

CONSERVATION STATUS: [Nature Serve Explorer]

SECURE in most states where native

APPARENTLY SECURE in IL and FL

VULNERABLE in VT

IMPERILED in ME

“As in the artificial garden we pass from parterre to parterre, or to conservatory or shaded fernery, each with its appropriate denizens, so in the wilds we find the worthier model, every condition of sod, of light, of shade finding its true expression.”
William Hamilton Gibson, 1850-1896

HISTORY

The unusual common (and genus) name is of obscure origin, but it was used by the French settlers in Florida as early as the sixteenth century. By 1574, shipments were made to Europe, where they were prized as a panacea.¹ This is a tree that was well known and well used by a myriad of Indigenous Tribes for a wide variety of uses. Those uses were eventually shared with colonial settlers, and continue today in spite of recognition of its carcinogenic tendencies when consumed.

By the 1700s, its use was widespread

among settlers and was brought into cultivation for its value.

DESCRIPTION

The most distinguishing feature of Sassafras trees, besides their lovely fragrant roots and bark, are their alternate leaves. Most trees are found to have leaves in 3 different shapes: oval, two lobed, and three lobed. The lobed leaves give the appearance of mittens, thus another common name given by settlers: mitten tree.

Slim branches have orange-brown or yellowish bark, with older trees displaying deeply ridged and slightly

reddish bark.

The trees are dioecious (a tree will have either male or female flowers) with fragrant flowers. The female flowers (1cm across), are borne in small, terminal clusters before the leaves appear, are without petals, but have six greenish-yellow sepals (3 to 5mm long). Male flowers are inconspicuous.²

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Sassafras female flowers. Photo courtesy: Kathy Schlosser



Sassafras drupes in cherry red pedicels. Photo courtesy: Jim Brighton

Often small trees, Sassafras can achieve great girth and height. The average is between 20 to 60 feet tall. They have an average life span of 100 years, with an occasional tree determined to be as much as 300 years.

HABITAT

In its natural location, Sassafras appears in soil that is rich in organic matter, moist, but well drained, neutral to acidic pH, in full sun or part shade, and in a spot that is sheltered from late spring frosts. It is often found along forest edges and in open clearings in woodlands. The trees can form dense thickets from sucker growth, which can be easily controlled with regular mowing.

POLLINATORS

Sassafras trees are dioecious, thus it is necessary for both a male tree and a female tree to be present for pollination to occur. In springtime, fragrant, greenish-yellow flowers bloom on both male and female trees at the tip of twigs shortly before or during the appearance of leaves. Male trees grow clusters of flowers producing pollen, while female flowers contain stigmas ripe for pollination.

Sassafras is an important nectar

source for pollinators. The trees are pollinated by bees, flies, wasps and beetles, who are attracted by the flowers' scent. Bees and several types of flies are the primary pollinators. Small bees, including honeybees, are often first to visit the flowers with the spicy early spring fragrance a primary lure. Wind can also act as a pollinator, blowing pollen from one tree to another.

Determination of Sassafras pollination may be indicated by flower color change. After pollination, the color of the flowers may change from a vibrant yellow green to a duller hue. The sassafras flowers may shed petals after pollination leaving only the pollinated pistil. Confirmation of pollination may also be indicated when small green fruit is observed. In late summer, the pollinated female trees have small oval drupes, which are fleshy and dark blue with thick red stalks. Each drupe contains one seed, which ripen in the fall. The fruit attracts birds, butterflies, and moths. The seeds are primarily dispersed by birds, such as quails, wild turkey, kingbirds, crested flycatchers, mockingbirds, sapsuckers, pileated woodpeckers, warblers, and phoebes. Mammals occasionally disperse seeds when the fruit is low enough for them to reach.

PROPAGATION

To propagate from seed, plant the seed ½ inch deep in cool soil during the fall and allow it to remain dormant. Keep the seed moist (cover with peat moss to maintain moisture). Fertilize with a root stimulant in spring when the taproot begins to develop. Once the sapling has a dozen runners, prune it back to one to maintain strength and to limit it to one trunk (if desired). The sapling may need support to encourage it to grow upright. If pruned early the plant will maintain this single trunk without additional pruning.¹



Sassafras in its Autumn glory. Photo courtesy: Susan Wood

Its deep tap root makes Sassafras a difficult tree to transplant, and if attempted a very young tree should be selected.

USES

First, a warning from the USDA: *There is "a compound in sassafras, safrole, which is considered a potential carcinogen in massive quantities. We are not that concerned, as we do not consume huge amounts of sassafras."*²

Among early settlers, "One of the medicines considered "right" for everybody was sassafras, one of the first native plants to attract the attention of the early settlers. Sassafras was not only a "cure-all," but tasted good, a rare quality in a day when "bitter brews" were supposed to be much better for you. "If something tasted terrible, like boneset, it jist had to be good fer you." Or, "bitter to the taste, sweet to the stomach, sweet to the taste, bitter to the stomach."³

Sassafras was used extensively for a wide variety of purposes by many Native American tribes including the Cherokee, Chippewa, Choctaw, Creek, Delaware, Oklahoma, Houma, Iroquois, Koasati, Mohegan, Nanticoke, Rappahannock, and Seminole.

Medicinal

Infusions from root bark were used to treat fevers, diarrhea, rheumatism, measles, scarlet fever, as a blood purifier and a diet aid to reduce weight. Decoctions of roots were used for fevers, coughs, colds, and heart troubles. A poultice of leaves eased bee stings, cuts, and bruises. The list

of treatments using Sassafras seem endless.

Food

Tea was made from the roots and young leaves were pounded to use as a spice and thickener in soups and stews (now known as file powder and used specifically for Cajun gumbo).

Household

The soft but durable wood of Sassafras was long used for furniture and household items such as buckets and fence posts. The plant was also used to perfume soap. It was the bark of roots that offered the flavorful oil enjoyed for beverages of many sorts, including the root beer of ages past.

Arthur O. Tucker explains that safrole, the substance credited with the flavor and declared carcinogenic by the FDA, is itself safe. However, when consumed it is metabolized to active carcinogens.⁴

Wildlife

Birds including turkeys, kingbirds, crested flycatchers, mockingbirds, sapsuckers, pileated woodpeckers, yellowthroat warblers and phoebes, assist with seed dispersal by consuming the fruits.

Bears, beavers, rabbits and squirrels, eat the fruits as well, and deer browse twigs and foliage.

REFERENCES

¹ Weaver, Jr, Richard E. 1976. A Neglected Native Ornamental, 1976. *Arnoldia*, Vol 36., No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1976), pp 22-27. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42953929> Accessed: 21-06-2024.

² Immel, Diana L. Plant Guide: Sassafras. USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center, Environmental Horticulture Department, University of California, Davis, California

³ Mellinger, Marie B. 1977. The Spirit is Strong in the Root, *Appalachian Journal*, Vol. 3/4, pg. 242-254. Stable URL <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40932162> Accessed 6-21-2023.

⁴ Tucker, Arthur O., DeBaggio Thomas, 2000. *The Big Book of Herbs*, Interweave Press, Loveland CO. pg. 551



The brilliant red-orange Autumn leaves of Sassafras lure hikers in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Photo courtesy: Kathy Schlosser

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Medicinal Disclaimer – It is the policy of The Herb Society of America not to advise or recommend herbs for medicinal or health use. This information is intended for educational purposes only and should not be considered as a recommendation or an endorsement of any particular medical or health treatment.

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