



Sassafras – A Spicy Native Tree

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At Girl Scout camp the summer of sixth grade, we learned many things including how to fold the flag, do the sidestroke, cook over a campfire, and make sassafras tea. Counselors introduced us to the unique leaves of sassafras and sent us out to collect sassafras suckers which we pulled up, peeled the roots, and concocted a most delicious, licorice tasting beverage.

Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) is a native deciduous tree ranging from southern Ontario to Florida and west to Iowa and parts of eastern Texas. It grows from 30 to 60 feet high with a spread of about half its height achieving a pyramidal shape as it matures. Sassafras is hardy from USDA zone 4 to 8. It naturally occurs in disturbed areas in full to part sun and can be found on the margins of woods, fields, fence rows and along the roads.

When in leaf, sassafras is an easy tree to recognize. Leaves are alternate and are ovate (oval with a pointed tip), two-lobed or three-lobed, with the two-lobed leaves looking like mittens. All three different leaf shapes are typically present on the same branch. The leaves are a bright green all summer changing into a delightful yellow-orange to red-orange this time of year.

Sassafras makes a delightful specimen tree but has a strong tendency to sucker so typically one will find small groves naturally occurring. If you have the room, allow a few of the suckers to grow as sassafras is a good wildlife tree. Those desiring only one plant should remove any suckers as they pop up during the growing season. Like most native trees, sassafras prefers well-drained, slightly acidic soils. It will tolerate some drought once established.

Light yellow spring blooms are small but fragrant and appear before the leaves start to grow. Sassafras is dioecious meaning that males and females are separate plants. Both sexes have flowers but only the females bear fruit that consists of a one-half inch long, dark blue drupe. The fruit ripen in September but drop quickly from the tree and are relished by many species of birds including mockingbirds, wild turkeys, quail, phoebes, and pileated woodpeckers.

Black bears, squirrels and rabbits enjoy the fruits as well as the bark of the sassafras tree. White-tailed deer sometimes graze the twigs and foliage, but I have not seen any deer damage to sassafras in my yard although the flower buds on nearby woodland azaleas are often devoured. Several species of swallowtails, most notably the spicebush swallowtail, use sassafras as a host plant.

Young trees exhibit greenish bark that becomes rough, thick, and deeply ridged with age. The color changes to a reddish brown as the trees mature. Sassafras wood is a dull orange brown but hard and resistant to rotting so useful for fence posts and rails back in Colonial days when this species was more plentiful. The wood was also used for furniture, ox-yokes, and small boats.

All parts of the sassafras are aromatic, spicy and have been used for human purposes. Many tribes of Native Americans used it for medicinal purposes ranging from treating wounds to fevers. They introduced early European colonists to sassafras and the demand in Europe for the bark and wood was such that for a while in the early 1600s, there was a bustling export business. Soon demand outgrew supply as the numbers of sassafras dwindled.

Key to the demand for sassafras is the safrole that is obtained by distilling the bark of the roots. This sweet, licoricey like substance was used to make root beer, both commercially and by home brewers. The USDA banned it in 1960 from use on a commercial scale as safrole was found to be carcinogenic. Sassafras oil is still used but the safrole has been removed.

Sassafras is also an important ingredient in traditional Louisiana Creole gumbo. Leaves are dried and ground and used as a thickener and flavoring known as file. Teas can be made from young shoots or the bark of the roots or purchased. The USDA lifted its ban on sassafras tea in 1994. If you want to try a cup of sassafras tea, read up on the health benefits and concerns before indulging.

For information on growing a sassafras tree or on any other home or garden topic, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit their web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.



