



Sassafras

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If you ever drank root beer or sassafras soda, you are familiar with the distinctive aroma produced by the root of the sassafras tree.

The sassafras tree, *Sassafras albidum*, is a member of the Laurel family and is native to North America. It can be found in open fields, hedgerows, and forest edges from southern Maine and southern Ontario, Canada, west to Iowa, and south to central Florida and eastern Texas. *S. albidum* is one of three existing species of sassafras in the world, with the other two being found in eastern Asia. There are four extinct species whose fossils are included in broader studies for understanding the origins and evolution of angiosperms.



Photo by Len Caliguari

The tree is dioecious, meaning that separate trees produce either all male or all female flowers. In the spring, yellow blooms fill the tree, followed by the female trees producing small dark berries. Its leaves have both distinctive mitten and fork-shaped patterns. Scents of citrus come from crushing its leaves, and the familiar aroma of root beer comes from the tree's roots. As a result, wildlife from butterflies to birds, rabbits, and deer are attracted to this tree. In the autumn, its distinctive foliage turns to shades of yellow, orange, and red. All of these qualities can make sassafras a nice addition to any "naturalized" landscape.

Sassafras has adapted to a variety of soil types but it grows best in open woods on moist, well-drained, sandy loam soils with low pH. If you choose to grow a specimen sassafras tree in your yard, understand that it can reach 30-60 feet high and 20-40 feet wide. In this case, it's best to keep





up with pruning and trim out any suckers that would have a tendency to create a small grove of sassafras in your yard! Otherwise, Sassafras requires little care.

Sassafras, as with all trees, is susceptible to insect-transmitted diseases that can impact their health. Many of these diseases can be treated with selective pruning and fungicides; however, 'sassafras' or 'laurel' wilt cannot be treated. Discovered in 2002, this disease was carried by the Ambrosia Beetle entering the country along the southern ports on ships from Asia. The disease is now spreading as far north as Kentucky. Unfortunately, once infected, it's best to destroy the tree to prevent disease spread. Ultimately, prevention is the best course of action in stopping diseases. This includes removing lumber (especially known imported wood material from Asia, i.e., wood pallets) and other outdoor plant litter that may carry insect larvae or attract pests.

Resources

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