

Name That Tree

By Pat Dickey, Fairfax Master Gardener

If you guessed Sassafras, you are correct. The Sassafras tree (*Sassafras albidum*) is native to the eastern part of the United States and Canada, and west to Missouri and Texas. It grows to 60 feet and can have a twisted trunk. Its brown bark has ridges and furrows and smells spicy when cut. The inner bark is cinnamon-brown in color. Sassafras trees grow at the edge of wooded areas, along fence rows, in fields and thickets and along roadsides. Native Americans made tea from the bark of the sassafras and flavored root beer with the roots. Recently, the oils have been found to be carcinogenic, containing the substance safrole. They are now banned from these uses by the Food and Drug Administration.



photo: Oregon State University



photo: Virginia Tech Dendrology

Sassafras flowers

During walks with my puppy around our condominium property, I have noticed young specimens of this native tree growing in the woods close to the path. Nicknamed the Mitten Tree, the sassafras has leaves that look like mittens. On one branch, it is not unusual to find three different shapes of leaves: an unlobed oval leaf, a two-lobed leaf resembling a mitten with one thumb and a three-lobed leaf with a thumb on each side. These leaves are alternately arranged on the branch and are 3 to 6 inches in length. They are pinnately veined and are fragrant when crushed. The leaves have outstanding color in the fall, a mixture of yellow, orange, red and pink.

Sassafras trees are dioecious, with male and female trees and flowers. Their bright yellow-green flowers bloom in mid-spring and are on 2-inch racemes. The fruit of the sassafras are dark, shiny blue, fleshy oval drupes in red cups, hanging from red stalks. These drupes mature in September, and birds are attracted to them.

They prefer a full-sun to partial-shade location with well-drained soil. They will also tolerate drought and clay soil. Their root suckers must be removed, or they will spread and begin to look like multi-stemmed shrubs. They also have a large tap-root, making them difficult to transplant when they are established. A mature sassafras tree will have a dense pyramidal shape.

A sassafras tree can be suitable as a lawn specimen but requires plenty of space to grow. It is also alleopathic, meaning that it can discourage or affect the growth of other plants in its root zone.

This native tree is the larval host to the spicebush butterfly, the tiger swallowtail butterfly and the pale swallowtail. It will tolerate deer browsing.

There are no serious insect issues for the sassafras, but slight damage from Japanese beetles, scale insects, weevils, defoliators and leafrollers may be evident.



photo: Virginia Tech Dendrology

Sassafras fruit

References

Sassafras albidum, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Austin, TX.

Sassafras albidum, Missouri Botanical Gardens



photo: Virginia Tech Dendrology

Sassafras bark