

Sassafras albidum

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Sassafras albidum is a medium sized tree in the family Lauraceae (Figure 1). The plant's native range is from southwestern Maine to central Florida and eastern Texas. It grows largest in the area of the Great Smoky Mountains because of the moist woodlands. The sassafras branching pattern is alternate, meaning branches do not grow directly opposite each other in the stem, but alternate along the twig. The leaves can come in three different shapes: oval, mitten, or three lobed (Figure 2). The flowers are a greenish yellow, with 5-6 petals and bloom in early spring. The fruit that Sassafras produce are a dark blue drupe that resembles a berry and are ripe in late summer (Figure 3). It is shiny, attached to a red stalk, with thick cotyledons. Sassafras has a habitat preference of moist, well drained, acidic soil, although it can tolerate a range of soil types.



Figure 1- Above is an image depicting the appearance of a Sassafras tree during the fall. (*Sassafras (Sassafras Albidum)* at *Family Tree Nursery*, 2019)



Figure 2- The above image depicts the formation of Sassafras leaves. (*Sassafras Albidum* | *Landscape Plants* | *Oregon State University*, 2025)

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Figure 3- image depicts the fruit (Domke, 2020)



Figure 4- depicts bark (Sassafras, 2014)

Biological and Ecological Significance

Sassafras has a variety of biological and ecological significance. The ecosystem around the plants depend on the bark, twigs, and leaves as a food source in many areas. Deer are one animal species that depend on the trees for food in the winter and leaves from the tree in spring. Many types of pollinators are hosted by the trees, including bees and flies. Sassafras trees are also suitable for reforesting disturbed, infertile soils because of their tolerance to various conditions. The plant does tend to require full sun for best growth. Sassafras is considered an early succession species, meaning that it thrives in disturbed areas.

Sassafras is also facing new threats in certain areas, Missouri in particular. Laurel wilt, which is an invasive species, is killing trees. The disease is a wood boring beetle, *Xyleborus glabratus*, that kills entire clumps of trees at a time. The beetle deposits spores of fungus, *Raffaelea lauricola*, into trees. This is harmful to large groups of Sassafras trees because they have interconnected roots, therefore the fungus affects several at a time.

Cultural Significance

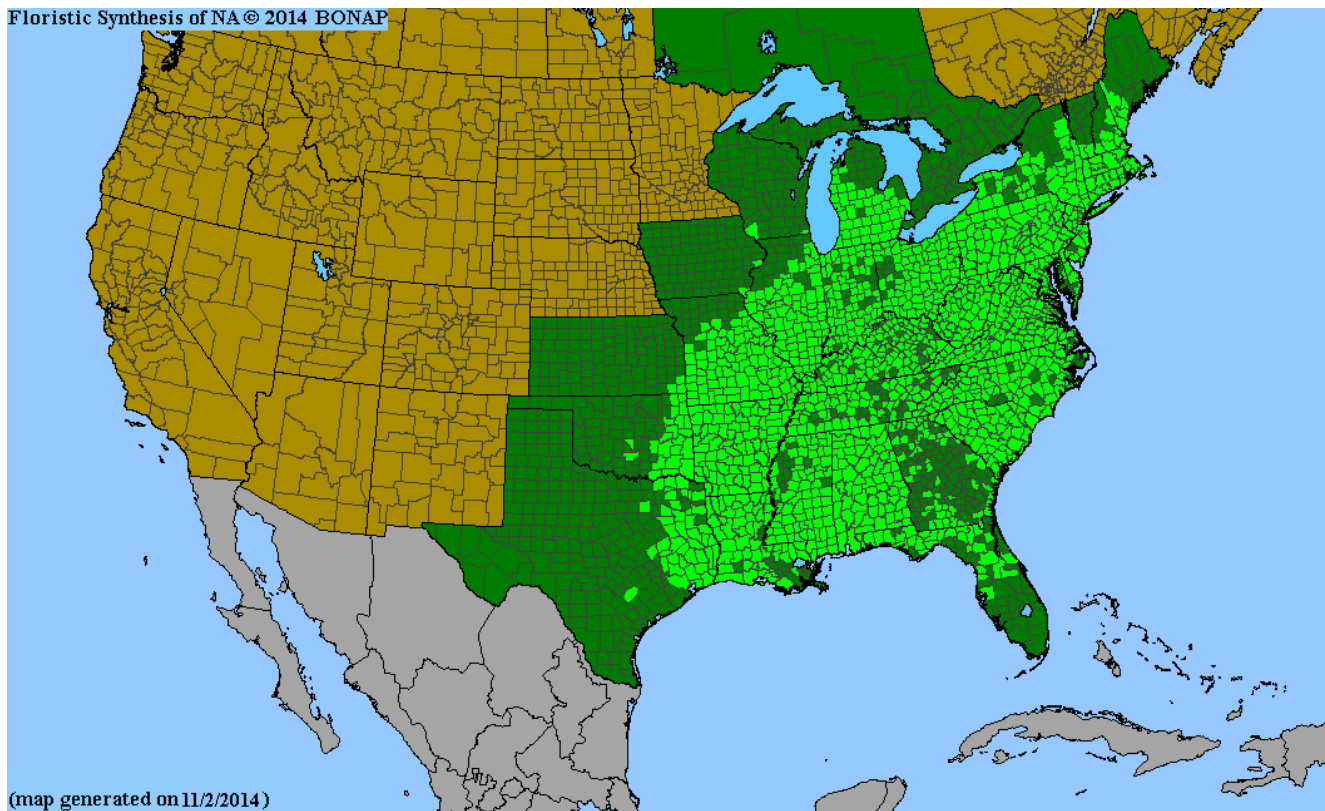
Sassafras holds significance in several ways: cultural, medicinal, and commercial. Sassafras has a long history rooted to Indigenous peoples of North America who utilized every part of the tree. The root is used in tea and for treating common colds. It was also used as an aid for digestion and general health. Sassafras leaves can be dried and create a powder to thicken soups. This technique is used in cajun and creole cuisines. The wood of sassafras trees is used for flooring, furniture, cabinets, etc. The wood is resistant to decay so it is also used for boats and fence posts. The bark of Sassafras contains an oil that is known for its spicy scent that is a combination of star anise, cinnamon, citrus, and vanilla. This is used to flavor teas, soft drinks, candles, soaps, and perfumes. That being said, safrole oil is considered a carcinogen and has actually been banned by the FDA since the 1960's.

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Several Native American tribes used Sassafras for many of the reasons above, however, they used it for more than what we do today. There were several names that Sassafras was given from different tribes, including *winauk* and *pauane*. The first uses in Appalachia were the Cherokee using it for weight reduction, which was then used by European settlers as well. They also used pieces of cut root as a necklace to aid teething pain in children. In some African American traditions, it is said that if there is a Sassafras root placed in the wallet/purses then it will prevent money from running out. There are also sayings that burning the wood is considered bad luck.

Overall, Sassafras has an abundance of significance in biological, ecological, and cultural aspects. This plant is important to the Appalachian area for many reasons. The history of the plant as well as the current importance of the plant are both critical to understanding the function it has in the environment. This was a considerably interesting plant to learn about.



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This image shows the native range of where Sassafras grows.

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Image References

- Figure 3- Domke, H. (2020, August 17). *Sassafras Fruit - Prairie Garden Trust*. Prairie Garden Trust. <https://prairiegardentrust.org/sassafras-fruit/>
- Figure 4- *Sassafras*. (2014, October 8). Tendrils. <https://www.brendaclem.com/sassafras/>

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Figure 1- *Sassafras* (*Sassafras albidum*) at Family Tree Nursery. (2019). Family Tree Nursery Plant Finder. <http://plants.familytreenursery.com/12130023/Plant/440/Sassafras/>

Figure 2- *Sassafras albidum* | *Landscape Plants* | *Oregon State University*. (2025).

Oregonstate.edu. <https://landscapeplants.oregonstate.edu/plants/sassafras-albidum>