**Sassafras albidum**  
*Sassafras*²

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson²

**INTRODUCTION**

This lovely, deciduous, native North American tree is pyramidal when young but later develops into a 30 to 60-foot-tall by 25 to 40-foot-wide, rounded canopy composed of many short, horizontal branches which give the tree a layered effect (Fig. 1). For years, Sassafras was grown for the supposedly-medicinal properties of the fragrant roots and bark but it is the outstanding fall display of foliage which should bring it into the garden today. The large, multi-formed, five-inch leaves, fragrant when crushed, are bright green throughout the summer but are transformed into magical shades of orange/pink, yellow/red, and even scarlet/purple in the cooler months of autumn, brightening the landscape wherever they are found. These colors are especially prominent when Sassafras is planted as a specimen or in a mixed shrubbery border, with a background of dark evergreens.

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Scientific name:** *Sassafras albidum*  
**Pronunciation:** SASS-uh-frass AL-bih-dum  
**Common name(s):** Sassafras  
**Family:** Lauraceae  
**USDA hardness zones:** 5 through 9A (Fig. 2)  
**Origin:** native to North America  
**Uses:** large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; shade tree; specimen; residential street tree; no proven urban tolerance

**Availability:** somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

**DESCRIPTION**

**Height:** 30 to 60 feet  
**Spread:** 25 to 40 feet  
**Crown uniformity:** irregular outline or silhouette  
**Crown shape:** round; pyramidal  
**Crown density:** dense  
**Growth rate:** medium  
**Texture:** medium

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Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: lobed; entire
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval); ovate
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous; fragrant
Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches; 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: orange; purple; red; yellow
Fall characteristic: showy

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; attracts squirrels and other mammals; fruit, twigs, or foliage cause significant litter; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; grow mostly upright and will not droop; showy trunk; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; no thorns
Pruning requirement: needs little pruning to develop a strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: green
Current year twig thickness: medium; thick
Wood specific gravity: 0.46

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: blue

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic; well-drained
Drought tolerance: high
USE AND MANAGEMENT

In spring before the leaves appear, the yellow, lightly fragrant flowers of Sassafras appear in one to two-inch-long terminal panicles and are followed by extremely attractive fruits. The small, dark blue, shiny drupes with bright red stalks ripen in early autumn and are quickly eaten by birds and other wildlife. Although the male plants have showier blossoms, it is the female plants which produce the fruit. Both sexes must be planted to insure this happy occurrence. Lastly, the roots can be brewed into a tea.

Sassafras frequently develops a multiple trunk due to sprouting at the base. Sprouts appear to originate from the root system forming a cluster of showy, grey fissured trunks growing from the soil. This characteristic has helped it invade and colonize old fields and other disturbed sites. Prune early in the life of the tree to form a single trunk suitable for urban landscape planting, or grow with multiple trunks for a dramatic specimen. Single-trunked trees are best-suited for street tree planting and other urban and suburban areas, and they usually maintain this good form without pruning.

Common Sassafras should be grown in full sun or partial shade, preferably on moist, well-drained acid soil but it will tolerate drier, rocky sites, where it is sometimes found in the wild. Richer fall colors are displayed on trees grown in the full sun and in the northern part of its region. Reportedly difficult to transplant due to its long tap root on well-drained soils and few but large-diameter lateral roots. This problem can be somewhat overcome by purchasing trees grown in containers but even container-grown plants can have a sparse root system.

Propagation is by seed or root cuttings.

Pests

Usually no pests are of major concern but it can be bothered by Japanese beetle, promethea moth, Sassafras weevil, and scales.

Diseases

Potential diseases include cankers, leaf spots, mildew, wilt, root rot.