

Sassafras albidum Sassafras¹

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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 shrubby 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 hardiness 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



Figure 1. Middle-aged Sassafras.

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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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

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

Flower

Flower color: yellow

Flower characteristics: pleasant fragrance; showy; spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch

Fruit covering: fleshy

Fruit color: blue

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

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

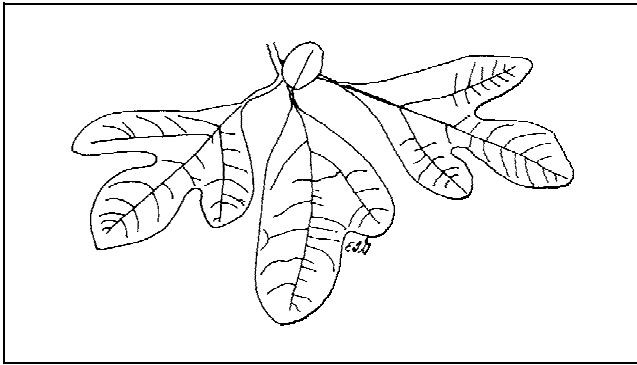


Figure 3. Foliage of Sassafras.

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

Winter interest: tree has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: little, if any, potential at this time

Ozone sensitivity: sensitive or moderately tolerant

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

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.