



Cultivation Notes

No. 53

THE RHODE ISLAND WILD PLANT SOCIETY Fall 2010

Sassafras – *Sassafras albidum*

Family: *Lauraceae*

Sassafras America's First Export

By **Garry Plunkett**

Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) is never the dominant tree in a forest but it certainly is one of the more interesting, and worth planting for its conversation value alone. It was originally thought of as uniquely American since it was unknown to sixteenth century explorers, though there are fossil records of it in Europe from pre-ice age times. Early English explorers came here for profit, not religious freedom, and the discovery of Sassafras eventually resulted in the New World's first market boom.

The rage for Sassafras was set off by the translation in 1574 of *Joyful News Out of the New Found World*, a book written by a Spanish physician (and botanist), Nicolas Monardes. It was a comprehensive listing of the medicinal qualities of new plants found in the western hemisphere. Sassafras must have had a chapter of its own, for its supposed curative powers covered everything from kidney stones to venereal disease. Even if one were not ailing, according to Monardes, Sassafras extract could prolong life and ward off evil.

Roots of this miracle plant were soon being grubbed by the ton and shipped to England for the continental market. Bartholomew Gosnold's initial voyage in 1602 to establish an American colony ran into trouble on Cuttyhunk Island, so they sailed back to England – not entirely disappointed because they had a highly profitable load of Sassafras. The crown charter for Virginia specified annual shipments of the root, and Jamestown alone was obligated for 30 tons per annum.

Thankfully, actual experience with those early root concoctions proved less beneficial than advertised, so Sassafras did not suffer the fate of American ginseng. Today it grows all over the Eastern U.S. as far north as southern Vermont and New Hampshire, mostly in oak-hickory forests. It can achieve an impressive size in southern forests, three-four feet in diameter, given good soil and sunlight, but it hardly ever grows to large stature in New England, especially in closed forest canopies, where it is overtopped by faster growing hardwoods. The largest local individuals I have seen, approximately 2 1/2 feet in diameter, are in Bristol. The current state "champion" Sassafras is listed in Providence with a 6-foot diameter, but I need to see that one to believe it.

Sassafras sometimes takes a curious growth form that is occasionally seen along roadsides. Instead of growing into a tree, it can spread by rhizomatous expansion into a thicket of small stems, creating a dense grove with no individual rising to tree size. I am unaware of what causes this, whether it is genetically based or stimulated by some environmental condition.

Sassafras is often the first tree learned by youngsters. The three distinctive leaf shapes of saplings, and its smooth green bark with the pungent smell are fun to point out to them. (A lad once corrected me, noting that there were actually four leaf forms, counting both left and right-hand mittens!).

As a sapling matures these characteristics begin to fade, because older trees tend to have only the one-lobe leaf, and the bark develops a more treelike corky quality. A close look at mature bark, however, reveals reliable keys — an orange-brown color and deep, woven furrows. Also, during wintertime the



Sassafras albidum

growth habit of upper boughs is recognizable. Branch ends curve upward, have minimal twiggy growth, and bear single large, terminal buds.



Sassafras has desirable qualities that make it a nice addition to a landscape. Some readers may be surprised to learn of its attractive early spring flowers. Before leaves emerge, the crown of Sassafras is adorned with soft, yellow-green blossoms. But it is in autumn that Sassafras really shows off. That's when its foliage explodes into a flaming torch of color, from bright yellow to deep orange.



The species is dioecious, though the difference in appearance between male and female flowers is unremarkable. Females seem to be a minority because their fruit, a half-inch drupe of deep blue, is infrequently seen.

Finding a reason to put a Sassafras in your landscape is easy. Finding the Sassafras to plant is more difficult. While horticultural references praise its desirable qualities, it is hard to find in nurseries. The largest regional wholesaler in my area, Sylvan Nursery in Westport, MA, does not stock it. I am lucky to have two Sassafras trees, one transplanted from a friend's property (your best bet) and another that hitchhiked on board the container of a hazelnut shrub I purchased at Nasami Farm Nursery (a long shot). Should you have a generous friend with young saplings to offer, find one that has germinated from seed, rather than from the sucker of a nearby tree. The little suckers have few fibrous roots of their own and will not readily transplant successfully.

If you can find one, plant it in the sun or a woodland edge with well-drained soil. Be sure to take precautions to protect it against deer browse and rut, especially if it is at browsing height. After taking root, saplings grow rapidly, so in a few short years you will be enjoying the delicate glow of Sassafras flowers on a dewy spring morning, and showing kids the three different leaf forms. Or is it four? Oh well, who's counting?



References:

Sheila Conner. 1994. *New England Natives – A Celebration of People and Trees*. Harvard University Press.
Charles Fergus. 2005. *Trees of New England – A Natural History*. Globe Pequot Press.

RIWPS Policy — *Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.*

Note: Cultivation Note is a regular feature in *WildfloraRI*, the Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Dick Fisher at Richard.Fisher2@verizon.net. The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article. — *WildfloraRI* Editorial Committee