Sassafras

Sassafras albidum Ague Tree

Sassafras is a lovely, deciduous native tree to North America. It is pyramidal when young, but later develops into a rounded canopy composed of short, horizontal branches giving it a layered effect. Sassafras has been long grown for its many medicinal uses. As a specimen tree, it brightens the landscape with many colors in the fall. During the growing season, the large, multiformed five inch leaves resemble right and left mittens and opposing thumbs. The leaves are fragrant when crushed. A member of the Laurel family, it is a small tree or large shrub dependent on light and fertility conditions. Sassafras frequently develops multiple trunks due to prolific base sprouting. It frequently pioneers old fields and is an important browse plant. I have wonderful memories of Sassafras throughout the Shawangunk Mountains.

Identification

Leaves

Leaves are alternate and variable in shape on the same tree with either none, one, or two lobes, often mitten shaped. Showy colors in autumn.

Flower/Fruit

Dioecious. Greenish-yellow flowers appear in early spring and develop into a single seeded dark blue drupe maturing in early fall. Bearing at 10 years.

Bark/Wood

Young trees have greenish bark turning reddish brown with age. Becomes deeply ridged. Obvious spicy aroma when cut.

Form

Small tree to large shrub. Early pyramidal shape transforms to more roundish with age and size. Often multi-stemmed. Shallow, lateral roots.

Uses

All parts of the tree are spicy and aromatic. Herbal teas are brewed from the bark and roots, leaves are used as a thickening agent in soups, the oil is used in soaps and perfurmes, and the orange tinged wood used in furniture and even boat making.

Ethnobotony

Cultivated since 1630 for its leaves, bark, and wood. Medicinal uses include treatments of diarrhea, nausea, fevers, cough, measles, and scarlet fever. Poultices rubbed into wounds. Ground roots used as spice. Soap and perfume fragrances.

Native Distribution

Maine west to New York, south to Gulf. Isolated groves in upper midwest.

Establishment

Difficult to transplant, but once established, requires little care. Best in partial to full shade.

Growing Conditions and Culture

Mature Size	45'Hx25'Wx1'dbh	Soils	Varied
USDA Zone	5-9	Drought Tolerant?	Yes
Light Requirements	Shade to Full Sun	Innundation Tolerant?	Yes

Pests/Damaging Agents

Highly susceptible to fire. Foliage diseases are primarily the damaging agents though rarely fatal. Insects attack Sassafras but damage is relatively unimportant.

Similar Species

Propagation

Seeds - immediately viable, germination increases in spring. Root sprouts common.

Source(s)

Transplants from Millbrook Mountain Trail, Shawangunks, NY.