

Sassafras albidum: Sassafras¹

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. 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 hardiness zones: 5A through 9A (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America

Invasive potential: little invasive potential

Uses: specimen; street without sidewalk; deck or patio; parking lot island > 200 sq ft; tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; shade; highway median

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



Figure 1. Middle-aged *Sassafras albidum*: sassafras
Credits: Ed Gilman, UF/IFAS

Description

Height: 30 to 60 feet

Spread: 25 to 40 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular

Crown shape: pyramidal, round

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

1. This document is ENH-742, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2006. Reviewed February 2014. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Edward F. Gilman, professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; and Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Nick T. Place, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.

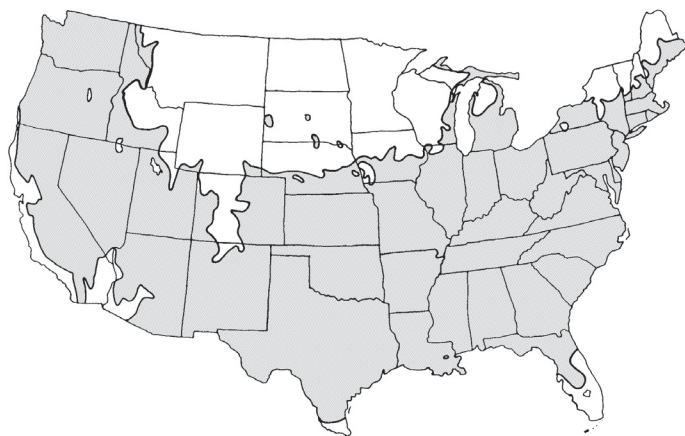


Figure 2. Range

Foliage

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

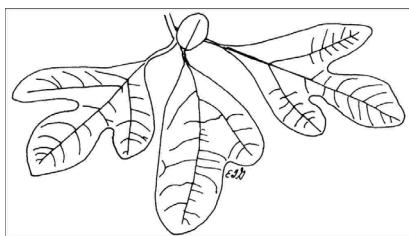


Figure 3. Foliage

Flower

Flower color: yellow
Flower characteristics: showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: blue
Fruit characteristics: attracts squirrels/mammals; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: branches don't droop; showy; typically multi-trunked; thorns
Pruning requirement: little required

Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: green
Current year twig thickness: medium, thick
Wood specific gravity: 0.46

Culture

Light requirement: full sun, partial sun, or partial shade
Soil tolerances: sand; loam; clay; acidic; well-drained
Drought tolerance: high
Aerosol salt tolerance: unknown

Other

Roots: not a problem
Winter interest: yes
Outstanding tree: yes
Ozone sensitivity: sensitive
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible
Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

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.

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.