SASSAFRAS

*Sassafras albidum*  
[SASS-uh-frass AL-bi-dum])

**Family:** Lauraceae

**Names:** Ague Tree, Cinnamon Wood, saloop, fennel wood, Sassafrax, Saxifrax; sassafras (French); Sassafras (German); sassafrasso (Italian); sasafras (Spanish); filé; Valkjas sassafras (Estonian); Sassafras roznolistny (Polish)

**Description:** A deciduous tree whose height varies with climate (larger in the south where it grows from 60-125 feet) The leaves are thin, with up to 3 lobes, resembling mittens to 5” long, green on top, pale beneath, turning color in late autumn with a spicy smell. The flowers are green-yellow up to 2 inches long. The root is woody, with a red-brown bark that is intensely aromatic. The fruit is dark blue-black with fleshy red pedicel. It blooms from April-June.

**Cultivation:** It is a perennial to zone 4. Germinates in 2-3 weeks and can be stratified for 4 months at 35-42F. Seeds are viable for about 2 years. Best propagated by root cuttings by cutting the seedling’s roots from the mother plant with a shovel and waiting until the roots are well established before transplanting. It prefers a sandy, fairly rich, well drained soil with a pH of 6-7. It prefers full sun in cool regions or partial shade in warm areas. Doesn’t flower or produce fruit until about 10 years old. Sassafras can be gathered all year. The leaves are in season from spring to fall, but the root is good all year. There are usually many immature saplings around a main tree and these smaller saplings can be easily uprooted. Choose those growing in the shade which won’t survive to maturity anyway. Dry whole roots and the leaves.

**History:** The name 'Sassafras,' applied by the Spanish botanist Monardes in the sixteenth century, is said to be a corruption of the Spanish word for saxifrage. Sassafras was imported in the 16th century to Spain. It is thought to be the first Native American medicinal plant that found its way to Europe and became of the earliest American export items. Native Americans had long used the root bark for fevers and it quickly was adopted into the settler’s medicinal repertoire included in a 1734 Virginian cancer cure. It was also included in many patent medicines-Godfrey’s Cordial combined sassafras with opium. It is still recognized in Ozark folk medicines as springtime blood thinner. History has it that the airborne fragrance of the highly aromatic trees enabled Christopher Columbus to convince his mutinous crew that land was near. A reputation as a cure for syphilis cost sassafras its respectability (no one wanted to be thought of having it) and as a result, its economic importance.

**Energetics:** spicy, warm

**Meridians/Organs affected:** lung and kidney
**Constituents:** oils, fats, resins, wax, camphor, albumin, starch, gum, lignin, tannin, salts and sassafrid. The oil contains: safrole (80-90%); 5-methosy-eugenol, asarone, coniferaldehyde, camphone and traces of menthone, thujone, anethole, apiol, elemicin, myristicin and eugenol.

**Medicinal Uses:** Sassafras has traditionally been used for treating high blood pressure, rheumatism, arthritis, gout, menstrual and kidney problems. The herb is listed in 1983 British Herbal Pharmacopoeia for head lice, cutaneous eruptions, rheumatic pains and gout, skin diseases and acne and ulcer. Sassafras is an excellent warming diuretic, which makes it good for most arthritic conditions. Dosage is 10-30 drops of the tincture. The root bark of sassafras improves digestion and increases sweating during flus, fevers and measles. It is slightly laxative, and has been used to reduce high blood pressure and to decrease mother’s milk. It is also a remedy for poison ivy and oak rash poison. Native Americans used a wash of the bark to bathe infected sores and of the twigs as eyewash. The plant’s disinfectant action makes a valuable mouthwash and dentrifice.

To make a tea wash the soil off the sapling’s root, simmer 20 minutes in a covered pot, strain, and serve. The tea is also good chilled and a root beer can be made by adding seltzer water and sweetener to it. Aromatic, stimulant, diaphoretic, alterative. It is rarely given alone, but is often combined with guaiacum or sarsaparilla in chronic rheumatism, syphilis, and skin diseases.

The oil is said to relieve the pain caused by menstrual obstructions, and pain following parturition, in doses of 5 to 10 drops on sugar, the same dose having been found useful in gleet and gonorrhea. It is used as a local application for wens and for rheumatic pains, and it has been praised as a dental disinfectant.

**Combinations:**
Skin problems: burdock, nettles and yellow dock

**Aromatherapy Uses:**
**EXTRACTION METHOD:** essential oil by steam distillation from the dried root bark chips
**CHARACTERISTICS:** a yellowy-brown, oily liquid with a fresh, sweet-spicy, woody-camphoracious odor.

**Ritual Uses:** For a love potion to attract a man include equal parts of dried lavender, bachelor’s buttons and clary sage with a pinch of valerian and a sassafras leaf. For a Prosperity Powder: 3 parts sassafras, 2 parts cinnamon, 1 part pine. To attract wealth in all forms.

**SAGITTARIUS SACHET**
3 parts sassafras
2 parts cedar
2 parts clove
1 part star anise
1 part Dragon’s blood
1 part juniper

**MONEY BREW**
3 parts sassafras
2 parts cedar
1 part allspice
1 part clove
1 part dill
1 part vetiver
1 part calamus

Half fill a green-glass bottle with fresh water. Add about a handful or so of the mixed, empowered herbs. Cap tightly and leave in full sunlight all day. At dusk, sniff the water. If the scent is strong, strain and add to baths, wash hands, anoint money charms and so on. If it isn’t strong enough, chill overnight and return to the sun the following day.

**Other Uses:** Sassafras was traditionally used in the food flavoring industry for preparations such as toothpastes, mouthwashes, tobacco and in flavoring sarsaparilla root beer. The wood is
used to make fencing, small boats and barrels. The wood and bark make a yellow dye.

**Dye:** 1 pot sassafras, twigs, bark and roots
1 tsp chrome
1 cup boiling water
1 lb wool
4 gal water

Boil the cut sassafras and add enough water to make 4 gallons. Cool. Dissolve the chrome in a small amount of boiling water and add it to the dye ooze. Stir. Enter the wet wool. Cover. Bring slowly to simmer and hold it there for about ¾ hour. Cool in the dye pot. Rinse until the water runs clear. Color: pinkish brown…with alum: tan

**Culinary:** Dried sassafras leaves have long been an essential ingredient in Cajun cookery, being the chief constituent of gumbo file. The file is added to soups and stews to give them a delightfully thick, smooth texture but not allowed to boil, or it will become stringy. In the southeastern US a sassafras and violet soup is prepared. The spicy young tips and flowers of sassafras can also be eaten in salads. Sassafras is responsible for much of root beer’s popular taste-now from a safrole-free extract.

The wood chips have long been used as a tea substitute, known in the 19th century in London as ‘saloop’. To make your own file powder gather young leaves in the spring. Spread them in a single layer on a cookie sheet, and dry them in a warm oven (150F) with the door open slightly until the leaves are crisp. Use a spice grinder or coffee bean grinder to make the leaves into a powder. Store in a covered jar.

**Caution:** The FDA banned safrole (and sassafras) for use in human foods in 1960 after safrole root bark caused liver cancer in laboratory mice. The results are controversial since the study was done on large quantities of safrole, not the whole bark. Also, when human subjects were given small doses of safrole, it did not turn into the cancer-producing substance as it did in rats. The essential oil of sassafras oil has been considered lethal. Symptoms of poisoning were vomiting and nausea.

**Recipes:**

**Fileé**
2 Tbsp young sassafras leaves, dried
1 Tbsp dried okra
½ tsp allspice
½ tsp coriander
¼ tsp sage

Mix and powder ingredients. Store in a jar with a tight lid.

**Gumbo**
2 cups tomatoes
½ cup green corn
1 cup okra, sliced
1 pepper, green or red, chopped
½ tsp salt
¼ onion, diced
¼ cup rice, cooked
5 cups water
2 Tbsp file powder
1 tsp cumin
3 tsp crushed hot pepper
1 tsp thyme
2 whole bay leaves
3 Tbsp chopped parsley

Simmer vegetables and rice in water, uncovered, until tender. Moisten powder with a little water and add. Serve warm over hot cooked rice.

**Sassafras Salsa**
2 jalapeno peppers, roasted, peeled, seeded and chopped
14 oz of peeled, chopped tomatoes and juice (canned, or use fresh and add ¼ cup juice)
5 pearl onions, roasted
1 clove of garlic, roasted
¼ cup chopped cilantro leaves, packed
2 Tbsp rice vinegar
1 tsp cumin
2 tsp white pepper
1 ½ tsp file powder

Heat the tomatoes, add all the ingredients except cilantro and file powder.
Remove from heat, then gently stir in file. Add cilantro leaves. Let stand approximately 20 minutes before using. Serve with chips, or as a side dish.

**York County Applebutter**
9 cups applesauce
5 cups sugar
¼ cup vinegar
2 tsp cinnamon
1 tsp allspice
1 tsp cloves
3-4 pieces sassafras root

Mix all ingredients together, pour into a casserole dish, and bake in a 350F oven for three hours, until mixture is dark, rich and thick. Stir every half hour or so. Remove roots, pour into sterilized jars, and seal with paraffin.

**Sassafras Root Jelly**
2-4 small, cleaned sassafras sapling roots, or 1 large root
3 ½ cups water
1 tsp powdered agar
1 Tbsp arrowroot or kuzu
¼ to ½ cup maple syrup or fruit juice concentrate

Simmer the sassafras n the water, covered, for 20 minutes. Turn off the heat and let the roots steep for another half hour. Remove the roots and measure how much tea you have left. Put 2 cups back into the pot and add the agar to it. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer for 10 minutes, or until the agar is dissolved. Meanwhile, mix the arrowroot with another ¼ cup of the cooled sassafras tea. Stir into the simmering liquid. Add the sweetener. Cook and stir another 5 minutes, or until the mixture thickens slightly. Chill. It’s ready to use when it gels. (Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants)

**Sassafras Lollypops**
1 cup sugar
1/3 cup White Karo Syrup
½ cup strong sassafras infusion

In heavy saucepan cook on medium heat to 300F on candy thermometer. Pour into molds. Let set in room temperature until cold. Wrap each piece for candy, or insert lollypop stick before completely hard. (A Taste of the Wild)

**Sassafras Liqueur**
1 cup sugar
1 ½ cups water
½ cup Pappy’s Sassafras Tea Concentrate ™
1 cup brandy
½ cup 100-proof vodka

Make a simple syrup by bringing sugar and water to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring constantly to prevent scorching. When clear, remove from heat and let stand until just warm. Pour syrup, sassafras tea concentrate, brandy, and vodka into clean 1-quart jar. Cover tightly. Let stand in a cool, dark place for 1 month. Rack or filter liqueur into final container, cover and age for 1 month before serving. (Cordials from Your Kitchen)

**Fried Squash Blossoms**
1 cup milk
1 egg
1 Tbsp flour
1 tsp ground dried sassafras leaves
3 dozen male blossoms, picked just before they open, mashed
½ cup oil
garnish: chopped fresh mint leaves or dill weed

Blend the milk, egg, flour, and seasoning in a bowl with a fork. Beat the batter until smooth. Place the mashed blossoms in the batter, stir gently, and allow to soak for 10 minutes. Heat the oil in a cast-iron skillet until hot. Fry the batter-coated blossoms, a few at a time, until golden, turning once. Drain on brown paper. Serve hot, garnished with mint leaves or dill. (Native Harvests)

**Sassafras Syrup**
Simmer 3 oz sassafras in 2 quarts distilled water for 15 minutes, strain, and add 1 ½ pints
honey and 3 ½ pints molasses. Bring to a boil once more and stir in 1 Tbsp cream of tartar and allow to cool. Decant into sterilized bottles, cork tightly, and store for 24 ours in a cool place before using. Dilute with soda water and serve with ice cubes. (Mastering Herbalism)

**Sassafras Candy**

The key to making Sassafras Candy is to add the root pieces near the end of the process rather than at the beginning, as the volatile oil will be lost while the liquid is being heated to the "hard crack" stage.

2 cups sassafras root pieces or bark (enough roots to yield at least ½ cup of pulverized bark peeled from the roots)
2 cups water
2 cups sugar
1-1/4 cups light corn syrup
1 Tbsp butter or margarine
1 well-buttered large Pyrex dish or cookie sheet, with a rim of ½ inch or more

Candy thermometer

Lightly scrub the roots in cold water to remove any residual dirt, then peel the bark off the root pieces with a knife or carrot peeler. Bring the water to a low boil and (optional: throw the peeled roots in and simmer them for awhile to give the water a little preliminary flavor and color boost). In the meantime, put the peeled root bark in a food processor and pulverize it until the root is ground up quite fine. You should have at least 1/2 cup of pulverized bark pieces when you're done (less will result in a less intense flavor in the candy. Pull out root pieces (if any) from the simmering water and add the remaining ingredients to the liquid. Boil at high temperature and get a candy thermometer ready. When the boiling liquid approaches a temperature of between 290-300 degrees, stir in the pulverized root bark and mix well. The mixture will sizzle and drop in temperature about 20 to 30 degrees as the moisture in the root bark boils off. When the temperature of the mixture gets back up to between 300-310 degrees (the "hard crack" stage), remove from heat and pour it out into the baking dish or cookie sheet and spread evenly. As the candy begins to solidify, you may want to score its surface with a knife to help you break it into uniform pieces later. Store in tightly sealed glass jars in a cool place, and it should retain its flavor and hardness for a year or more.

**References:**