



SWEET SASSAFRAS

A Fall Stunner with a Long History of Medicinal and Culinary Use

TEXT BY WALT BUBELIS | PHOTOS BY NIAL DUNNE

Sassafras...what a unique name! Like Seattle or Walla Walla. It is fun to say, and it's fun to look at the leaves of the eastern North American tree species, *Sassafras albidum*, because they come in three different shapes: unlobed ovals, bi-lobed “mittens,” and tri-lobed “turkey feet.” And the fall color...sublime!

Interestingly, the name sassafras derives from a corruption of “saxifrage” attributed to 16th-century Spanish botanist Nicolás Monardes. Sassafras and saxifrage are not closely related—with the former residing in the Lauraceae, or laurel family, and the latter in the Saxifragaceae, or saxifrage family—so it's unclear what Monardes was getting at. But perhaps it was a reference to a medicinal use of sassafras. Saxifrage is derived from the Latin words *saxum*, meaning “rock,” and *frango*, meaning “to break,” so perhaps the botanist was indicating a treatment for kidney stones.



Native Americans historically have used different parts of the sassafras tree to treat a variety of ailments. Early colonists adopted these practices, and—by the 1600s—sassafras was described as a cure-all for a wide variety of ills such as malaria, liver and stomach disorders, chest colds, fevers, nausea and rheumatism. For a while, the dried roots sold for extremely high prices in England, but eventually the plant’s reputation declined. Sassafras extract continued to be used in this country as an ingredient in spring tonics and other medicines.

ROOT BEER REJECT

The laurel family includes species such as the California bay (*Umbellularia californica*) and bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*), both well known for their aromatic leaves. Sassafras itself has a strong but pleasant smell in all its parts, from leaves to roots. The dried leaves traditionally have been used as a culinary herb and soup-thickening agent by the Choctaw tribes of the South, and they are still used to flavor and thicken some Creole dishes, such as gumbo. In the southeastern states, sassafras leaves were mixed with the native tobacco leaf and smoked, much to the amazement of the early European explorers.

Early root beers used sassafras as a flavoring, and people still make their own medicinal sassafras tea by boiling the root bark. However, sassafras was banned as a food ingredient in 1976 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration—due to its high concentration of the organic compound safrole, which was found to have carcinogenic properties in rats. It is still legal to use the crushed, dried leaves as filé powder—a herbal seasoning for gumbo—because the amount of safrole involved is small.

Nowadays, many root beer producers have replaced sassafras with sarsaparilla, which has a similar flavor profile (including hints of anise, eucalyptus and wintergreen). It is derived from the roots of *Smilax ornata*, a thorny evergreen vine from Mexico and Central America in the Asparagaceae, or Asparagus family.

IN THE LANDSCAPE

I first became aware of sassafras while taking undergraduate classes in botany in Indiana. On field trips—and just driving through the rural countryside in the autumn—I couldn’t help but notice stands of glowing orange or red-leaved trees. Visitors to the Washington Park Arboretum can enjoy this lovely fall color by visiting the large cluster of *Sassafras albidum* that grows next to the giant sequoia grove along Arboretum Drive. Peak foliage viewing is around late October to early November. The specimens (originally three trees, but now a small grove) date to 1937 and were sourced from the UW Drug Plant Garden, now the UW Medicinal Herb Garden.

One doesn’t grow sassafras for its blooms, which—though fragrant—are not distinctive. The small, greenish-yellow flowers appear in



Fall color in the sassafras grove on Arboretum Drive.



tight, terminal clusters in early spring as the leaves begin to appear. When pollinated, they develop into half-inch-wide, blue-black, oval-shaped drupes suspended from bright-red stalks (pedicels)—the better to attract a variety of birds and other wildlife.

Sassafras albidum naturalizes easily, forming a thicket if the soil is loose and fertile and the plant is in a warm, sunny site. It normally grows between 30 and 60 feet tall (though heights of more than 80 feet have been recorded), presenting a thick, furrowed, reddish-brown bark. In its native range—from Maine and Quebec to Michigan, southward through Illinois to Texas and all states in between—the tree is a host plant for the caterpillar of the beautiful promethea silkmoth (*Callosamia promethea*).

Two other species round out the genus:

Sassafras randaiense, from the evergreen forests of Taiwan, featuring more triangular-shaped, less-lobed foliage; and *S. tzumu*, from China, with more oval-shaped foliage. The latter, sometimes available commercially, is known for its new growth—flushing a pinkish-bronze tone—and open-tiered structure, similar to some dogwood trees. Root cuttings and detached root suckers are the normal mode of propagation for *S. albidum* and *S. tzumu*.

So, if you're not going to eat or drink any sassafras, is it worth growing? I vote yes. The fiery autumn colors and those distinctive leaf shapes always attract attention. If you have a warm spot in the garden, with a little elbow room, sassafras will reward you with a pest-free small tree that you can freely underplant with a variety of lower shrubs and groundcovers.



SMILAX FOR THE NORTHWEST GARDEN

The tropical sarsaparilla vine, *Smilax ornata*, is not a plant you can grow outside in Seattle. However, a closely related, woody vine from the U.S. Southeast called coral greenbrier does pretty well here. Dan Hinkley gave me a young specimen years ago that he thought appropriate because its scientific name is *Smilax walteri*! The roots can be harvested to produce a flour for soups and bread or a thick jelly, used to make candy and sweet drinks—with a flavor that's similar to sarsaparilla.

The small, mostly evergreen plant (mine lost its leaves this past cold winter) bears spade-shaped leaves, often with white spots. Its flowers are nothing to write home about, but the fruits are handsome orange-to-red berries. The thorns are a vicious surprise when it comes time to prune!

Once, when my plant reached over 20 feet tall, I dug out a side shoot and discovered a large subterranean root mass the size of a basketball! I replanted this, but next time I dig one out, I plan to extract some of the sarsaparilla-like goodness from the roots. 🍷

WALT BUBELIS is a professor emeritus in the Horticulture Department at Edmonds Community College. He is also a member of the "Bulletin" Editorial Board.