

NATIVE WILD FOODS:

The Pleasures of Sassafras

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz

Sassafras is a member of the Laurel family, which contains such trees as camphor; all three of the *Persea* bays: silk bay, swamp bay, and red bay; and also one shrub: the spice bush. The *Sassafras* genus has only three species in it: one in China, one in Taiwan, and the third—our own Florida species, *Sassafras albidum*. Originally, it was named *Sassafras variifolium*, but sometime in the early 1800s it became *S. variifolium* var. *albidum*. Now it's just *S. albidum*. I think the taxonomists should have left it the way it was to begin with, since *variifolium* means "varied leaf", while *albidum* refers to "white".

In Florida it grows from Orange County north, where it reaches about 15 feet tall and one to two inches in diameter. It is a large tree in some parts of its range—farther north it increases in size until, in Pennsylvania, it reaches 50 to 60 feet tall and two to three feet in diameter.

In New York State the Indians named it *wah-eh-nak-kas*—their "smelling stick".

At the northern end of its range, sassafras forms small dense clumps, and it's one of the first trees to invade abandoned fields. They don't usually form pure stands, but grow in association with dogwood, American hornbeam, oak, persimmon, and others.

The leaves are unique and unmistakable. They are 3-5" long, and 1½ to 3½" wide. They come in three shapes: entire (which means not lobed at all), mitten-shaped (either left or right), or three-lobed. Sometimes all three shapes are on one twig, sometimes they are scattered all over the tree. In one case on SR 40 I saw a tree with all its leaves entire. And I have also collected one five-lobed leaf. Indian lore says that it's good luck if you find a matched mitten pair, one left and one right, on the same tree.

The leaves are deciduous, turning yellow and red in the fall before they drop off.

Both leaves and twigs are aromatic with that wonderful, special sassafras odor. And yet on one occasion I found a sassafras tree with no aroma at all. On

a canoe trip with my (then) nine-year-old son, I told him to pick and crush the leaves from a tree with three-lobed leaves and smell them. He couldn't smell anything—and when he handed them to me, neither could I! I've never encountered this phenomenon again, but I guess it happens sometimes.

The flowers are yellow-green, and bloom about the same time that the leaves appear in spring. Male and female flowers appear on separate trees. The fruit is a round, blue stone fruit (drupe), with an orange-red cap and a long stem, and with very aromatic flesh.

The wood is light, durable in contact with soil, and orange-brown in color. It, too, is slightly aromatic. One of my hiking sticks is made from this wood.

The sassafras appears in well drained soils in fence rows and fields. It is one of the few plants that has been introduced from the New World to the flora of Europe.

Now we get to the good part—how to prepare it to eat. Sassafras tea has long been known as a spring tonic. Tea is made from the roots, either from suckers or from a tree. Digging and clipping a few roots off a tree will not hurt it. Pack the dirt back around the cut to eliminate air, and it will heal. Wash the roots, break them up or sliver them, and boil for a few minutes in water. They can be saved, dried, and used over again.

You can make a similar tea from roots of the camphor tree, which has an aroma similar to sassafras, but not nearly as good.

The dried crushed leaves of the sassafras are the "filet gumbo" in Cajun cooking. You can use powdered leaves as thickener in all soups and stews.

Sassafras makes a delicious jelly. Brew three cups of strong tea and make jelly following the recipe on a box of Sure-Jel.

Once you've made the jelly, use it in your baking. Make up a cookie recipe, put dabs of the dough on a cookie sheet, press a hollow in the cookie with your knuckle, and fill the hollow with jelly before you bake them. You'll have

As always, collect your wild foods in safe places, not along roads where pesticides may have been sprayed, or automobile exhaust poisons have collected. Be safe, not sorry.



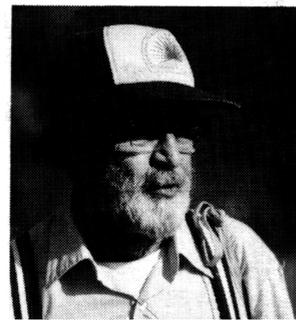
Sam Hopkins

cookies with sassafras jelly filling.

Or cut small triangles from bake-and-serve croissants, and fill them with jelly before baking, or make sassafras-jelly-filled doughnuts. Use your imagination and creativity, and let me know if you come up with something good.

Beer can be made by boiling sassafras twigs in water, adding molasses, and letting it ferment. Filter and bottle.

There has been talk lately about sassafras, and other herbal teas, being carcinogenic. I feel it's doubtful. You probably couldn't ingest enough even over a long period of time to be harmful. But be sensible: don't steep or boil teas for long periods of time. Brew them just enough to make a good-tasting tea.



Dick Deuerling

Dick Deuerling welcomes information on using native wild plants in new recipes. If you've tried something new and it turned out tasty, let him know (5611 Sandalwood Drive, Orlando 32839. 407/855-2795).