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## Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*)



From [Stalking the Wild Dandelion](#)

A Guide to Wild Edible Plants for Parents  
and Teachers to Use With Children

*A new, as yet unpublished, work-in-progress.*



**Sassafras Tree in Flower**

### **Description:**

Medium-sized, root beer-scented tree with 3 kinds of leaves; flowers tiny, yellow, 5-petaled, in spring; fruits blue-black, egg-shaped, 1/2 inch long, in long-stalked cups in summer; 3 leaves oval, mitten-shaped, or three-lobed, 3-5 inches long, fragrant, toothless; roots very fragrant; twigs green, hairy under magnification, curving upward like candelabras.



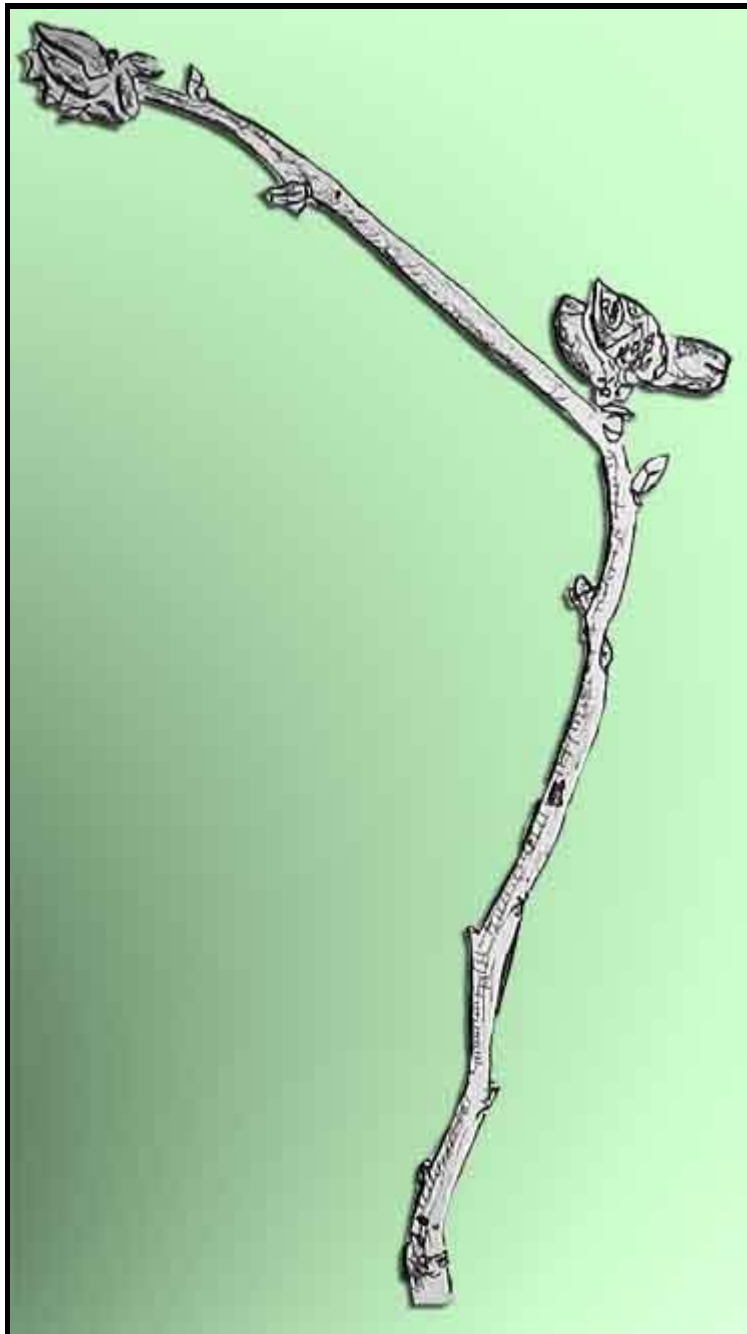
### Sassafras Flowers

Sassafras is a tree with three different leaves. One is oval, one partly divided into three lobes, and one is mitten-shaped. The edges are smooth.



### **Sassafras Sapling**

If you tear or crush the leaves, they smell like root beer. You can make tea with the leaves by pouring boiling water over a handful, letting them sit covered, away from the heat, 20 minutes, then straining out the leaves. The roots of small saplings are even better.



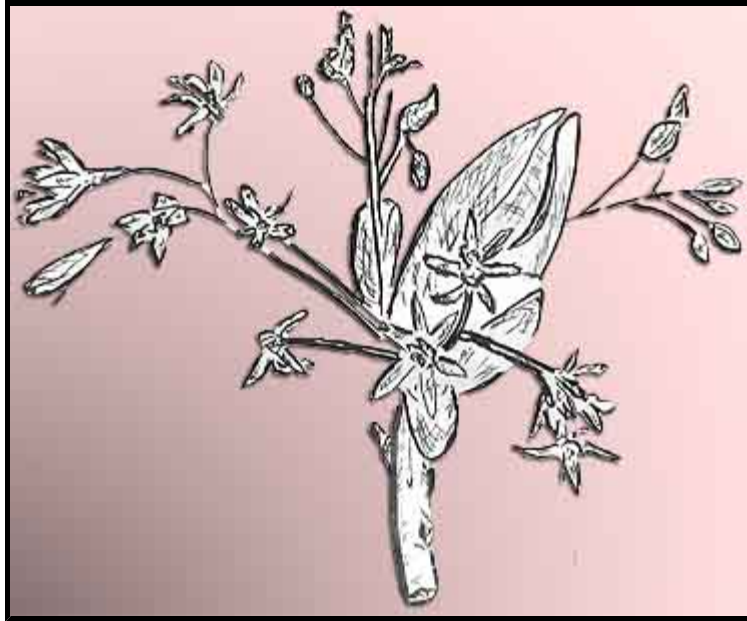
### **Sassafras Twig**

Sassafras makes so many extra seedlings, that you can usually pull some up without harm, especially if some friends help. Grab the bottom of the green, root beer-scented saplings with both hands, and pull slowly, so the root doesn't break off.

Sassafras grows at the edges of forests, in thickets, and along residential streets in the eastern half of the U.S. It's in season all year, although you must recognize the green, erect, sweet-smelling leafless twigs to harvest in the



winter.



### Sassafras Blossoms

The inner bark or cambium is the living part of a tree. The outer bark, and the wood in the center, is made from tiny units called cells which have died.

Wash off the soil, and gently simmer the root in water, covered, over low heat 20 minutes. Because leaves are delicate, you usually don't boil them because the flavor will boil off. Roots are tougher, so usually must boil them to get at the flavor.

Remove the root, and drink the tea. You can use the root over again. To make root beer, chill the tea, then add drop of honey for sweetness and some sparkling water for fizz. You can also chew on sassafras twigs to freshen your breath.

### WHERE DID SASSAFRAS GET ITS MITTENS?

#### Persian and Flemish Folklore

Long, long ago, the first people began life as a double tree. God separated the two trees, gave them souls, turned the branches into arms and legs, and made the crowns into heads filled with the gift of knowledge. Other trees also wanted to become people. They tried, but didn't make it. However, some of their leaves, like sassafras', are shaped like human hands, showing our link to trees.

In Arkansas, superstitious people never burned sassafras wood. They thought that someone would die when the wood cracked and sputtered.

Fire inspired many other superstitions: in Massachusetts, people believed that the flame would take the shape of the leaves of the tree you were burning.

Note: You may have heard that sassafras has been banned by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) because it causes cancer. Huge quantities have given to rats over long periods of time give the rodents cancer because they change the molecule sassafrrole into a cancer-causing one. Humans don't do this, and no one has ever gotten sick from sassafras. Sassafras was banned because there are a lot of rats in the FDA!

Before...



*I'm going to like this experiment!*

After...



*No More Sassafras, Ple-e-e-ase!*

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