



Sassafras – The Big Tree for August By Anne Krantz, Tree Steward, UNH Cooperative Extension's NH Big Tree Committee

Last summer, I helped remeasure the Hillsborough County Champion sassafras tree, originally measured in 1973, to update the New Hampshire Big Tree records. We drove up and down the rural country road, lined with hedgerows and thickets looking for the distinctive mitten-shaped sassafras leaves that are so easy to spot. We finally gave up and got help. Once we were told to look over our heads - there it was!

Actually there were several huge ones, and it was hard to tell which was the tallest. These astonishingly tall sassafras trees, soaring to the sky, are totally unexpected this far north. New Hampshire is the northern edge for this mostly southern tree, and smaller, shrubbier trees are more usual here. Sassafras belongs to the tropical plant family *Lauraceae* that includes [cinnamon](#), [cassia](#) and [camphor Laurel](#), [bay laurel](#), [spicebush](#) and [avocado](#). On the other hand, American mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) isn't a member of the laurel family, but belongs in the Heath family.

The tallest one, growing in a lovely sunny location, is 115 feet tall. It's a handsome tree with a straight trunk and lush foliage. The three forms of the odd leaves: oval, mitten shaped and mitten with both a thumb and pinky finger, grow in clusters at the end of the twigs. Open sunny sites like this have declined in New Hampshire as farms reverted to forest during the past century. Sassafras is classified as intolerant of shade at all ages, and dies out when overtopped by taller trees.

We have a clump of shrubby sassafras trees on our property growing along the road at the edge of a wooded area. Sassafras grows on moist, well-drained, sandy loams (the exact conditions we have,) and is a pioneer species that sprouts in abandoned fields, along fence rows, or following fires. The ones in our property probably sprouted when the former farm was abandoned, but that was long ago and the clump is now becoming shaded by tall oaks and pines. The trees next to the road where a sliver of sun peeks through are the most vigorous.

Clumps of Sassafras trees expand by underground runners from parent trees. I discovered this years ago when I tried to make tea from the bark of the roots. The fragrance from the crushed leaves is truly delightful and enticing - spicy, with a hint of orange, so I fell for the idea. I selected a small sassafras sprout for this experiment, but discovered the root was a runner – so the sapling died and I got some dirty root bark that did inspire me to make the tea. Early settlers must have been desperate to go through this to get a cup of tea. But in addition to the interesting taste, they attributed medicinal qualities to the tea – it was popular as a spring tonic to 'thin the blood'.

Early 15th and 16th century explorers looked for spices similar to the wonderful ones found in the East Indies. Cinnamon and camphor were valuable products for both food preparation and for medical uses. Since the first explorers thought they were in Asia, sassafras was mistaken for other trees, and they named it ‘cinnamon tree’.

UNH Cooperative Extension Forest Resources Educator Jon Nute explains that “during the early colonial era, the settlers were desperate to send goods back to Europe to make money to pay the bills they incurred in getting here in the first place. Sassafras bark has a spicy aroma, and when ground and added to boiling water, made sassafras tea, which was popular in Europe as a cure for syphilis and other ailments. It is not a cure, but the people thought it was. It was such a convenient moneymaker for the colonists (easier than catching and salting cod, curing beaver hides or sawing white pine lumber) that the trees were heavily exploited to the point that they became rare in what had been their natural range. The trees have been recovering and multiplying from this experience since.”

By 1610, sassafras was so highly prized England demanded sassafras oil from the Virginia colony as a condition of charter, and by the mid-1600s, it was second only to tobacco in export to Europe from America. But harvesting roots for tea, and other economic uses didn’t do much for the species survival. The mass of sprouts near the parent tree are a bit weedy, so early settlers could hardly imagine that harvesting the roots would harm the supply, any more that fishing or logging would ever end.

Not only was sassafras not an effective cure-all medicine, it wasn’t healthy in food. The Food and Drug Administration determined that oil of sassafras was carcinogenic and banned it from commercial uses in foods in 1976. It could no longer be used to flavor root beer and candies. Maybe root beer did taste better in the old days! The fragrance industry also banned it, so it’s no longer used to scent perfumes or soaps either.

The orange colored sassafras wood is of little value for lumber aside from utilitarian uses like buckets and posts.

The new twigs are very green and have a pleasant taste when used like a tooth pick. The new stems are green and stay green all summer long, a distinctive feature. Because of the thick layers of leaves, the trees are stunning in the fall when they turn a pretty yellow-orange color. The most unusual is the fruit – I couldn’t believe my eyes the year our young trees first produced fruit. I thought I was in the tropics because of the vivid colors: clusters of blue berries encased in a bright red cup on a red stem. I have been watching each fall, but no production of seed has matched that year – they produce bountiful crops of seed only every three to four years. The seed is distributed by birds and I have a few sprouts growing on the other side of the yard, in too much shade. I was ready to yank them out, but now that I know they are rare, they will stay, adding to the jungle look of our property. Sassafras saplings are hard to transplant, mostly because of the attachment to the parent plant by the runner. I don’t know about these solitary plants – maybe I’ll try to move one.

You can help the NH Big Tree Committee update its records by looking for giant trees. To compare a tree you discover with the New Hampshire champions, visit the NH Big Tree web site

at www.nhbigtrees.org for the complete list champion Big Trees. If you find one that seems bigger than those listed, contact the NH Big Tree State Coordinator, Carolyn Page, carolyn_page@hotmail.com, 603-664-2934, who will pass the information on to the appropriate county coordinator.

UNH Cooperative Extension and the NH Division of Forests and Lands sponsor the NH Big Tree program in cooperation with the National Register of Big Trees through American Forests.

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