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Sassafras in America

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By R. Kelley Coffey

While the Southern Appalachian Mountains abound in flora traditionally known for their medicinal properties, few equal the sassafras tree in its historical economic impact. The tree triggered a health craze in Europe upon its discovery in North America, when it gained a reputation for curing everything from wounds to rheumatism. Sassafras became a major commodity for early America, and continues to have economic significance today.

The root in root beer

Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) can be immediately recognized by its mitten-like leaves. The leaves appear in three shapes oval, two-lobed, and three-lobed- all on the same tree. Dig out a root and a second distinctive characteristic becomes evident — a sweet, spicy scent. The scent is reminiscent of root beer because the drink was originally flavored with sassafras root, hence the name. Although art-ificial flavors are now usually responsible for root beer's taste, some brands still use

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sassafras as an ingredient.

Sassafras trees are usually found in colonies along the edges of the forest and in recently-cleared areas, sharing this habitat with locust trees here in the Appalachians. Dense thickets are common because individual trees readily sprout from the shallow root system. While sassafras often dominates a site short-term, other tree species eventually overtake the colonies. In many situations, the growth of sassafras trees is stunted, but they continue to thrive as a shrub in the forest understory. Many people regard sassafras as a weed, due to the tree’s ability to prolifically reproduce asexually and adapt to a variety of habitats.

When autumn arrives, sassafras leaves and fruit seemingly work in concert to provide migratory birds a nutritious meal. Sassafras berries are blue, and attached to red stems. The leaves turn color early, in a process known as “foliar fruit flagging.” Foliar fruit flagging is common among many trees that produce high-fat berries, such as dogwood, sassafras, and magnolias. Migratory birds need the energy from such berries as they begin their long flight south. The early color change on sassafras signals the birds that high-energy food is available on these trees.

Wonder drug

The southern Appalachians are located at the center of sassafras’ natural range, which covers much of eastern North America. The Spanish discovered sassafras when they arrived on the continent in the 1500s, and soon began shipping it to Europe. They are usually credited with naming the tree, but it is unclear whether or not the name was borrowed from the Indians. Native Americans utilized the tree in treating various ailments, but in Europe it became a wonder drug with the reputation of curing almost any illness — even retarding old age. While root tea was the most common method of partaking

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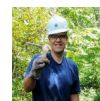


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the healthful qualities of sassafras, other parts of the plant were utilized as well. Various utensils were made from the wood, such as spoons and cradles. Sassafras gained such a high reputation that people even attributed supernatural powers to it. For example, the belief spread that incorporating sassafras wood into a ship's hull would prevent it from sinking.

The popularity of sassafras gained momentum, and soon literally boatloads of it were being shipped to Europe. Sassafras became a commodity, contending with tobacco as the major export of the American colonies. Since the discovery of America, Europeans had been fascinated with exotic American plants, but few reached the level of economic importance as sassafras. Its economic significance, however, declined quickly. No matter how high demand rose in Europe, a seemingly unlimited supply of sassafras grew wild on the vast North American continent. The expansion of white settlement and the conversion of forests to farmland, in fact, encouraged the proliferation of the tree since it thrives along the forest edge. The market became flooded with sassafras products, prices dropped, and by the time of the American Revolution the commercial glory of sassafras had faded.

Fragrance & file'


Despite the initial boom-and-bust, sassafras retained a modest degree of economic significance as it came to be utilized in various manufactured products such as candy, flavoring in patent medicines and toothpastes, and, of course, root beer. Even in modern times, Appalachian residents have supplemented their income by harvesting and selling sassafras to botanical supply companies. It is still in demand today as a fragrance in soap. The most notable modern commercial use of sassafras is for gumbo file' — i.e. dried sassafras leaves. Sassafras tissue has a mucilaginous quality that Indians recognized early on to be useful as a thickener in various

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dishes. The Choctaw Indians taught French Louisiana settlers to dry and pulverize sassafras leaves — which they called “file” — as an ingredient to add texture to gumbo, soups, and stews. File’ remains an important element in Creole and Cajun cooking and can be purchased in most grocery stores.

Commercial and medicinal uses aside, sassafras has always been popular for many home applications. Some folks enjoy the root tea as a beverage, regardless of any reputed medicinal qualities. In pioneer days, the roots were also used to prepare a brown dye. The number and variety of historical uses of sassafras — from drugs to soup — is unparalleled among native southern Appalachian plants.

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