

# Making Ripples

## The Stunning Sassafras Tree

by Amanda Bancroft

If you haven't picked a favorite tree yet, consider choosing the sassafras. It's a native, with showy fall color, many useful applications of its parts, aromatic properties, wildlife appeal, and unique leaves. (It's also just fun to say: sass-a-fras!) It's called cinnamon wood, mitten tree, and smelling stick by some people because of its wonderful features.

This is a deciduous tree that can grow up to 50 feet tall, although the tallest sassafras might be a Kentucky resident at 100 feet in height and 21 feet in circumference! Sassafras trees can have male, female, or both male and female parts on the same tree, although locally we have just female or male varieties – it's based on the species. Females have dark blue fruits on scarlet stalks around this time of year (late summer).

An easy identifier is to look for a tree with three kinds of leaves: oval, mitten-shaped, and three-lobed. Or count the main "parts" of the leaf. Does it look like the leaf is mostly one part, two or three? It can be difficult to tell if you have a tree with three kinds of leaves or a tightly packed cluster of three kinds of trees, but follow the branches from the trunk with your eyes until you can clearly spot the leaves. They're bright green most of the year, but you'll see red and orange ones right now as fall gears up for a display before winter. The bark is orange, brown or yellow and quite stunning to see especially if it's been ripped open or fallen in a storm.

There are many aromatic, medicinal, and culinary uses for all parts of the tree. Sassafras roots are turned into oil to perfume soap, and used to make tea. Its twigs and leafstalks are pleasingly spicy to taste. Once upon a time, its twigs were even used as toothbrushes! Nowadays, the FDA restricts the commercial use of sassafras due to concern that it is a potential carcinogen, according to Wikipedia.

Crush the leaves, and you might smell a citrus scent. Crushed leaves are a traditional part of Creole cuisine, including gumbo. All parts of the plant are aromatic and the leaves, bark, twigs, stems, and fruits are eaten by wildlife. Deer, porcupines, groundhogs and even black bears enjoy the leaves. In winter, cottontail rabbits eat the bark. Bobwhite quail, woodpeckers and many other birds love the fruits. It's also a host plant for the spicebush swallowtail butterfly.

It tolerates a wide variety of soil types and can often be found along fence lines. Check with an expert to be sure your location is a good fit for a sassafras tree before planting, as there are many considerations to take into account for the whole life of this wonderful tree.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: [www.RipplesBlog.org](http://www.RipplesBlog.org).