

Naturally: Sassafras trees — an Appalachian folk delight

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Sassafras leaves emit the odor of Froot Loops cereal when crushed and can be used to thicken stews and soups, similar to flour or corn starch.

Sassafras (*sassafras albidum*) is a whimsical understory tree that is common all along the Appalachian Mountains. Sassafras trees are abundant in Indiana County, including throughout White's Woods and in other public areas such as Yellow Creek and Blue Spruce.

A fairly small tree, sassafras grows 20 to 40 feet in height with a trunk 1 to 2 feet in diameter in the northern end of her range, such as here in Indiana County. Sassafras often grows as an understory tree in our common oak-hickory forest. The tree grows in an unscripted fashion, with branches coming out at random angles, twists and curves.

You can identify sassafras in winter by their growth pattern or their deeply grooved, medium brown-gray bark with smaller twigs in medium green. In summer, the key identifying feature is the leaves, which are soft, green, rounded and fragrant.

Sassafras has three different leaves, usually appearing on the same branch. These include three-lobed leaves (like a double mitten), two lobed-leaves (like a mitten) and a leaf with a single lobe. If you pick a leaf and tear it or crush it, you will get the smell of Fruit Loops cereal. In the fall, sassafras continues its fantastical display with a wide range of foliage colors, ranging from sunny yellow to bright orange to bold red to crimson and purples. A single older sassafras tree can have the entire rainbow at one time.

Sassafras reproduces by cloning through a lateral root system. If you've ever met a mother sassafras in the forest, you can look on the forest floor and see many babies surrounding her, all sent out by the mother tree. The babies live by the nutrients of the mother and through hope that the forest will open up enough to give them life and light to reach into the canopy. Young sassafras trees have green bark, and as they age, by seven to 10 years old, they will grow the characteristic darker bark, with the bark ridges getting thicker with age.



This tree provides habitat and food to the spicebush swallowtail butterfly and the *Promethea* moth along with other moths and insects. While sassafras does produce small purple fruits, the fruits are sparse on the tree. They are fed on by various birds including wild turkeys, woodpeckers, catbirds and northern bobwhites. In winter and spring, white-tailed deer can enjoy the foliage and branches, and rabbits may eat the bark, particularly in lean winter months.

Sassafras roots are famous throughout the Appalachian mountains as both delicious and healing. Anyone who has grown up here has heard or has drunk sassafras root tea. The folk tradition is to harvest and brew the roots in the fall to help “thicken” the blood for winter. Sassafras root has a very warm, spicy and sweet aroma, and sweetened with a bit of local honey or maple syrup, is truly a delight to drink.

To harvest sassafras root sustainably, we can go back to how sassafras grows. A large mother tree sends out many small babies into the forest. There is usually a very long root between the baby and the mother, and you can dig up most of the root, leaving enough for the baby to survive. You can collect a lot of sassafras root this way and not cause harm. Please only harvest what you need and do not harvest on any public lands.

The leaf is also an incredible wild food. Sassafras leaf can thicken stews and soups, similar to flour or cornstarch. Dried and powdered sassafras leaf has a slightly sweet and green taste that offers a complex and savory flavor, most traditionally, to gumbo.

A “filé” gumbo is a gumbo soup that uses dried and powdered sassafras leaf as the thickening agent. To make your own filé, you can harvest sassafras leaf anytime during the growing season, but before the leaves turn colors in the fall. Generally, younger leaves are more tender and less bitter, making for excellent filé. Please be sure to take only what you need and not take many leaves from any one tree. Dry your leaves and then grind them up into a powder (using a food processor or mortar/pestle). Now you are ready to use them in soups and stews!

Sassafras is a wonderful, whimsical and delicious tree that offers so many different gifts. Take some time to stroll in White's Woods and see if you can spot the stands of sassafras as well as the babies branching off in different directions.

The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.