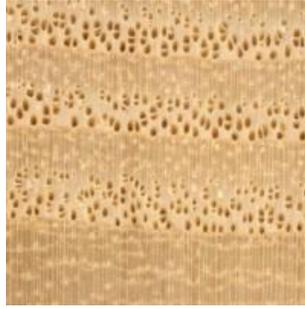


## Wood of The Month

### **Sassafras albidum**– Sassafras



Besides lumber, sassafras, conjures up thoughts of; tea, flavorings, folk remedies, drugs and aromas. The topic of sassafras is a wide array of exploration, intrigue and folklore. The sassafras tree is native from southwestern Maine to southeastern Kansas to central Florida. It is now extinct in southeastern Wisconsin but is extending into northern Illinois. It grows best in open woods on moist, well-drained, sandy loam soils, but is a pioneer species on abandoned fields, along fence rows, and on dry ridges and upper slopes, especially following fire. Being a pioneer means it is one of the first trees to grow in a region. It is a Missouri native, ornamental, small to medium-sized deciduous tree which can grow to 60ft tall. It is easily identified by its characteristic leaf pattern of “mittens”. The leaves are lobed with either one, two or no lobes giving the appearance of mittens.

Common names for *Sassafras albidum* are; sassafras, cinnamon wood, white sassafras, golden elm, saxifraxtree, sassafac, aguetree and red sassafras. Sassafras wood is light in color, from a pale brown to an orangeish brown. It resembles ash, chestnut and hackberry in appearance, but is softer than all three. Sassafras is noted for being a “soft” hardwood with an interesting grain pattern. Sassafras is very easy to season, but may check during drying. It is suitable for steam bending, works easily, finishes well and glues well. It is very durable when exposed to dampness, making it suitable for fences, house sills, cooperage and canoe paddles.

The oil of sassafras has a distinctive odor that is apparent on freshly cut surfaces of the wood and bark, and the roots are harvested for commercial distillation of the oil of sassafras, which is used in tea, soap, perfumes, flavorings (probably the most notable being root beer) and medicines. The orange color obtained from the bark was used by early settlers to dye material. However, before you go off to brew up a cup of sassafras tea, consider the fact that, safrole, the oil found in sassafras, has been found to cause liver cancer in laboratory animals. In 1976, the Federal Drug Administration listed it as a carcinogenic and officially banned the sale of sassafras tea, roots, and oil.

Tales of all sorts of folklore abound surrounding sassafras, from claims that it was a remedy for malaria and other fevers, a comfort for the liver, stomach and head, a cold remedy and appetite inducement to beliefs that sassafras wood bedsteads would induce sleep and keep away bedbugs. In the Ozarks, if someone gives you a sassafras canoe paddle, you know this person respects you and is your friend. However, do not try to buy a sassafras paddle from a friend, as it can only be a special gift.

You can read more about Sassafras at; [Sassafras on the Wood-database](#) and [Sassafras on Wikipedia.org](#) .

*Written by – Mel Bryan*

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