



## *Sassafras albidum* (Nutt.) Nees Sassafras

Lauraceae (Laurel Family)

Blooming season: May

Plant:

Michigan Big Tree record: 182" girth, 78' tall, Jackson County. Generally a small tree, 6-15 m tall, 20-60 cm diameter. Root suckers readily, often forming colonies of shrubs or very small trees. Twigs bright green. Tips of branches "markedly upswept" (Barnes and Wagner 1981, p. 104).



Leaves:

Alternate, deciduous, simple. Often lobed: sometimes one side only (the famous "mitten"), sometimes both sides or neither. All three forms often on same branch. Dull, dark green above, lighter below, 8-15 cm long, 5-10 cm wide. Leaves open after flowering.

Flower:

Dioecious, or tending to be (Voss 1985). Both the male and female flowers have six greenish yellow sepals, no petals. Very small, 4-5 mm long sepals in loose, open racemes. Insect pollinated.



Fruit:

Drupe, 1 cm ovoid, dark blue, with one seed. Ripens September-October. Conspicuous, enlarged red pedicel.

Can be confused with: Three shapes of leaves on one tree is unique, and the mitten very distinctive, especially to Michiganians.

# Kasey Hartz Natural Area Reference Sheet



## *Sassafras albidum* (Nutt.) Nees Sassafras

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### Geographic range:

Type specimen location:

State: Southern 2/3 of Lower Peninsula, and on the west coast up to Traverse Bay.

Regional: Southern Maine to southern Ontario, through Michigan to eastern Kansas and Oklahoma, south to Florida and over to Texas.

### Habitat:

Local: Throughout the Kasey Hartz Natural Area, but commoner in edge habitat.

Regional: Dry sandy woods (especially oaks), old dunes, fence-rows, mixed deciduous, and low wet woods.

### Common local companions:

Oaks, maples, huckleberry, and bracken fern.

### Usages:

Human: Sassafras has an extensive history of use, as have many other members of the Laurel Family. Native Americans used a tea made from flowers and also roots as a febrifuge, and made an ointment for bruises and ulcers from the leaves. The use of the root bark against malaria and diarrhea was widespread; in medicines used for kidney stones, dropsy, measles, and scarlet fever. The leaves were used on wounds to stop bleeding and as an antiseptic; other uses for them were as a sun-fast orange dye; as a major ingredient in root beer; as a smoking tobacco. The bark was used for purification "after funerals at doctor's school and after death of patient" (Moerman 1998 p. 519), and to make a vermifuge. Other parts were used: to make an eyewash; medicines for high blood pressure and heart problems; as a tonic; a sedative; for both vomiting and diarrhea; and for a cough medicine. Some of these uses were copied by European colonists, especially its uses as a febrifuge and diuretic, and as a spring tonic. The bark of the root was in the Pharmacopoeia Londinensis in 1618, at which time it ranked with tobacco as an American export (Vogel 1970). It was listed in the USP from 1820-1926, and in the National Formulary from 1926-1965, when its removal may have been prompted as much by reports of toxicity as from lack of efficacy. That is also possible regarding oil of sassafras which was in the USP from 1820-1955, and in the National Formulary from 1955-65. Ironically, sassafras oil had been regarded as a cancer cure in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; one element of the oil, safrole, is now known to cause liver cancer in test animals. A tea prepared from the flowers became very popular in London; it lost its popularity when it became touted as a cure for venereal disease.

Other animal: Insects are required for pollination. The promethea moth and some swallowtail butterflies use the tree as a nursery, laying their eggs on it so that the leaves will provide food for their caterpillars. Birds and mammals eat the fruit, helping the species spread.

Why is it called *that*? The derivation of *Sassafras* is considered "dubious" by some (A.W. Smith 1997, p. 304); Sargent states that "Sassafras was first used as a popular name... by the French in Florida" (Sargent 1965, p. 363), but explains no further. It is possible that it is Latin for stone-breaking. *Albidum* is Latin for white, and another mystery as to why it is used.

Prepared by: Barbara Lukacs Grob April 2008