

sassafras *Sassafras albidum*

Kingdom: Plantae

Division/Phylum: Magnoliophyta

Class: Magnoliopsida

Order: Laurales

Family: Lauraceae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

Sassafras is also known as white sassafras or red sassafras. This small- or medium-sized, deciduous tree commonly grows to a height of 40 feet, and with good growing conditions, may be as tall as 80 feet or more. Its trunk diameter is often two feet or larger. The bark is green-gray when young and becomes red-brown and deeply furrowed when older. Twigs are smooth and green. The oval buds are green, about one-fourth inch long. Twigs, leaves and bark have a distinctive fragrance when damaged. The leaves are simple and arranged alternately along the twigs. Leaves take one of three shapes: two-lobed; three-lobed; or unlobed. A single leaf may be six inches in length. The leaf is green and smooth on the upper surface and pale and smooth or hairy on the lower surface. Male (staminate) and female (pistillate) flowers develop in small clusters on separate trees. Flowers open as the leaves begin to unfurl. Each green-yellow flower is about one-third inch long. The fruit is a drupe (a seed enclosed in a hard, dry material that in turn is covered with a fleshy material). The dark-blue, fleshy, one-seeded drupes are about one-third inch long, held in deep red cups and on stalks up to two inches long.

BEHAVIORS

Sassafras may be commonly found in the southern three-fourths of Illinois and rarely in the northern sections. It grows in woodlands, thickets and roadsides. Flowers are produced from April through May. Leaves turn orange, red and yellow in the fall. The orange-brown wood is soft and brittle. The wood is sometimes used to make fence posts. Leaves, fruits and twigs are used as a food source by wildlife. Birds are the main dispersal agent for sassafras, eating the fruits and depositing the undigested seeds in their waste materials.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

bottomland forests

Woodland Habitats

bottomland forests; southern Illinois lowlands; upland deciduous forests

Prairie and Edge Habitats

edge

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