Sassafras albidum

[Synonyms : *Laurus albida*, *Laurus sassafras*, *Sassafras albidum* var. *molle*, *Sassafras molle*, *Sassafras officinale*, *Sassafras radix*, *Sassafras sassafras*, *Sassafras variifolium*]

SASSAFRAS (English, Finnish, French, German, Swedish) is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to eastern North America it has small greenish-yellow flowers and leaves that sometimes turn orange and yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as Ague tree, Black ash, Chewing stick, Cinnamon wood, Common sassafras, Filé, *Fleberbaum* (German), Gumbo filé, *Kašťa bělavá* (Czech), *Laurier sassafras* (French), Mitten tree, Red sassafras, Safras, *Sasafrás* (Spanish), *Sassafrasso* (Italian), Sassafrax, Saxifrax, Smelling stick, and White sassafras.

Different qualities of essential oil are extracted by distillation from the ripe fruit (used for perfumes) and from the root bark and roots (used for toiletries and less expensive perfumes). [An alternative synthetic essence can be obtained from brown oil of camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*).]

Warning – sassafras should not be taken internally consistently for more than 3-4 weeks nor should it be taken during pregnancy. The oil's internal use can cause kidney and liver damage, as well as vomiting, dilated pupils, stupor and collapse. Externally it can irritate the skin and cause dermatitis. In 1960 the United States banned both the use of sassafras itself in human food and safrole (contained in sassafras).

Albidum means 'whitish' with reference to the underside of the leaves.

Some authorities suspect that the drug produced from the tree was the first North American medicinal plant drug to arrive in Europe. The wood and the tree are believed to have been imported to Spain in 1574 after an expedition made to Florida (southern North America) by the Spanish botanist, Monardes ten years earlier. It is he who is said to have named the tree Sassafras (a name that for some is believed to be a corruption of 'saxifrage' in Spanish) and while in Florida he had noted how the local inhabitants had used it. In Spain sassafras roots are said to have gained a name as a remedy for syphilis and rheumatism. Some authorities believe that it was an Italian chemist, Angelus Sala (1576-1637), who first used a distillation process to extract the oil from its wood.

Although sassafras was familiar to many North American Indian tribes as a source of medicine it was also used by the Cherokee Indians to scent soap. They used the wood too to make furniture – and they and the Chippewa tribes used the roots to make a kind of tea. For both the Choctaw and Chippewa tribes the leaves offered a food flavouring.

As a source of medicine however it was valuable to many tribes including the Creek and Seminole. Mohican, Iroquois and Rappahannock Indians all took it as a tonic, and the latter used it as both a sedative and a stimulant too. Cherokee Indians chewed the roots to freshen their breath after eating members of the onion family (*Allium*) – and they also used the plant to help counter obesity. The Seminole tribe used sassafras to cause vomiting and also as a laxative. It provided several tribes, including the Delaware, Iroquois, Choctaw, Cherokee and Chippewa with a treatment for blood disorders, and the Nanticoke, Seminole and Cherokee Indians all used it for easing fever. The latter two turned to it as a treatment for diarrhoea, and the Seminole Indians prescribed it for urinary problems. Colds were eased with it by Iroquois, Seminole and Cherokee tribes,

and the Seminole also used it for coughs and sore throats. Sassafras was used to treat measles by Houma, Rappahannock and Choctaw Indians, and the Houma also valued it as a remedy for scarlet fever. Iroquois Indians employed it for childbirth, and they also used it to treat nosebleeds. It provided the Cherokee with a treatment for venereal disease, and they and the Iroquois used it to ease rheumatism and, incidentally, expel worms. The plant was applied to skin ailments by the Iroquois, Seminole and Cherokee tribes. Koasati Indians used it for insect stings, the Iroquois sometimes chose it for treating wounds, and the Rappahannock turned to it for healing burns. Sassafras was also used to treat various eye problems by Seminole, Rappahannock, Iroquois, Cherokee and Mohican tribes.

The plant was used for making tea during the American Civil War of the 1860s, especially in the South and it was also used for this purpose in Europe including in Britain. Some authorities point out vociferously that one should not be misled into believing that sassafras tea was only drunk because of a shortage of imported (Asian) tea during the Civil War. In the American South settlers had long adopted the local Indian practice and much enjoyed the deep red coloured sassafras tea, especially in the Spring when the roots were boiled with sugar maple sap (*Acer saccharum*).

It is declared by some authorities (many of whom subscribe to the reports that Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) introduced the tree to England from Virginia in 1587) that the tree was definitely being grown in England by 1597 – despite the suggestion made by others that it did not arrive until five years later. The latter claim relies upon the story of an English explorer and eventual settler in the North American colonies, Bartholomew Gosnold (1572-1607) who first came across sassafras trees off the Massachusetts coastline. [Although Gosnold is little known in England today his name is still familiar around Martha's Vineyard and Cape Cod. After all he named these places, together with several other nearby islands east of Boston and the small New England town of Gosnold (which embraces 133 Elizabeth islands) was in turn named after him and boasts a monument erected to him.] He found sassafras trees in May 1602 on what was eventually called Cuttyhunk Island but after three weeks' experience of unwelcoming Indians he returned to England with sassafras amongst his cargo and arrived in Exmouth in July 1602. (Gosnold was so enthusiastic about the beauties of the New World however that he returned there permanently in 1607 and was one of the prominent founders of Jamestown in Virginia – it has even been suggested that without his enthusiasm the United States would have had Spanish not English foundations. In early 2005 the BBC national home News reported that American archaeologists had sought help in confirming that a grave then recently discovered in Jamestown contained Bartholomew Gosnold's remains. This meant that DNA samples needed to be obtained from the graves of Gosnold's sister and niece believed to be buried in Suffolk as no living descendant had been found.)

The coarse, soft and brittle, lightweight wood is also durable and insect resistant and is said to have been used by early settlers in Virginia for building their forts. It is still used today for making barrels, small boats, inexpensive furniture and fencing.

A yellow dye can be obtained from the bark and the wood.

In the United States the young shoots gave their flavour to root beer, and in Louisiana in the South the powdered leaves have long been used (today safrole-free) for thickening soups, particularly the traditional Creole gumbos and also as a condiment in sauces. The widely known traditional cordial, sarsaparilla, was flavoured with it and it was also mixed with opium (*Papaver somniferum*) and sold as 'Godfrey's cordial'. In 1871 when Thomas Adams patented 'chicle gum' (*Manilkara zapota*) sassafras was one of the gum's flavourings. Across the Atlantic in Britain until the 1920s 'Saloop' (a sassafras tea mixed with milk and sugar) could be bought in the early morning on London street corners.

Today various grades of the oil are used on a commercial scale by for instance by the perfumery industry, and some offer a flavouring ingredient for the tobacco industry. Sassafras can also be used by the chemical industry, while the toiletry industry can include it in soaps and deodorants. Until fairly recently it was used in American soft drinks too and provided a flavouring for confectionery.

Medicinally, sassafras used to be recommended as an ingredient in remedies for treating rheumatism, syphilis and skin diseases. It was also used in dentistry. Today however it is being given closer examination as it may be poisonous (it is known that it can cause kidney and liver damage) and has already been withdrawn by some countries as a flavouring agent, especially in food.