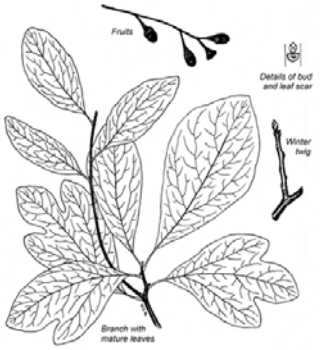
Maine Tree Species Fact Sheet

Common Name: Sassafras (White Sassafras)

Botanical Name: *Sassafras albidum*



http://www.clemson.edu/extfor/publications/bul117/images/Sassafras_albidum.gif

Tree Type: Deciduous

Physical Description:

Growth Habit: The sassafras is a medium-sized, moderately fast growing, and aromatic tree with three distinct leaf shapes. Sassafras grows best on moist, well-drained sandy soils in open woodlands. The bark on young stems is thin and reddish-brown. On older stems it becomes thick and scaly. The inner bark is very fragrant and sometimes chewed. The leaves are alternate, very hairy when they first appear, loosing the hair at maturity except on the midrib. They are light green in color and of 3 shapes: entire, mitten-shaped, and three lobed.

Height: The sassafras reaches a height of 30 –60 feet and spreads 25-40 feet. This species is hardy to Zone 4.

Shape: Sassafras is a pyramidal, irregular tree in youth, with many short, stout, contorted branches, which spread to form a flat-topped, irregular, round-oblong head at maturity. It often sprouts from roots and forms extensive thickets.

Fruit/Seed Description/Dispersal Methods:

Sassafras is dioecious. The greenish-yellow flowers appear in April as the leaves unfold. They develop in loose, drooping racemes containing 10-15 flowers. The fruit ripens in September and October and is a blue, lustrous drupe, which is supported on a fleshy, red stalk. Birds are the principal agents of seed dissemination.

Range within Maine:

Sassafras occurs in southern Maine in eastern Cumberland, southern Oxford and York Counties.

Distinguishing Features:

The distinguishing features of sassafras include the cinnamon red inner bark; bud with one scale forming a cap; three shaped leaves (entire, mitten-shaped, and three lobed); and the blue fruit which is supported on a fleshy, red stalk.

Interesting Features:

The wood is soft, weak, brittle, very aromatic, light brown and very durable in the soil. The roots and bark are distilled for oil of sassafras, which is used to perfume toilet articles.

Relationship to Wildlife:
Deer browse the twigs in the winter and leaves and succulent growth in the spring and summer.

Landscape Use:
Sassafras is an excellent species for naturalized plantings, roadsides and the home landscape.

Common Problems or Pests of the Tree in Maine:
Sassafras is susceptible to cankers, leaf spots, mildew, root rot, Japanese beetles, promethea moth, sassafras weevil and scales.

References:

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Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, 5th Edition. Dirr, Michael A. Publishing L.L.C. 1998.

United States Dept. of Agriculture: Silvics of North America:
http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_2/sassafras/albidum.htm

Maine tree club

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