

Sassafras

Botanical: *Sassafras officinale* (LEES and EBERM.)

Family: N.O. Lauraceae

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---**Synonyms**---*Sassafras varifolium*. *Laurus Sassafras*. *Sassafrax*.

Sassafras radix.

---**Parts Used**---Bark-root and the root, pith.

---**Habitat**---Eastern United States, from Canada to Florida, and Mexico.



Nees, Sassafras

(*Sassafras albidum* Nutt.)

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---**Description**---The name 'Sassafras,' applied by the Spanish botanist Monardes in the sixteenth century, is said to be a corruption of the Spanish word for saxifrage. The tree stands from 20 to 40 feet high, with many slender branches, and smooth, orangebrown bark. The leaves are broadly oval, alternate, and 3 to 7 inches long. The flowers are small, and of an inconspicuous, greenishyellow colour. The roots are large and woody, their bark being soft and spongy, rough, and reddish or greyish-brown in colour. The living bark is nearly white, but exposure causes its immediate discoloration. The roots are imported in large, branched pieces, which may or may not be covered with bark, and often have attached to them a portion of the lower part of the trunk. The central market for all parts is Baltimore. The entire root is official in the British Pharmacopoeia, but only the more active bark in the United States, where wood and bark form separate articles of commerce. The bark without its corky layer is brittle, and the presence of small crystals cause its inner surface to glisten. Both bark

and wood have a fragrant odour, and an aromatic, somewhat astringent taste.

The tree, which has berries like those of cinnamon, appears to have been cultivated in England some centuries ago, for in 1633 Johnston wrote: 'I have given the figure of a branch taken from a little sassafras tree which grew in the garden of Mr. Wilmot at Bon.' Probably it was discovered by the Spaniards in Florida, for seventy years earlier there is mention of the reputation of its roots in Spain as a cure for syphilis, rheumatism, etc., though its efficacy has since then been much disputed.

The fragrant oil distilled from the rootbark is extensively used in the manufacture of the coarser kinds of perfume, and for scenting the cheapest grades of soap. The oil used in perfumes is also extracted from the fruits. The wood and bark of the tree furnish a yellow dye. In Louisiana, the leaves are used as a condiment in sauces, and also for thickening soups; while the young shoots are used in Virginia for making a kind of beer. Mixed with milk and sugar, Sassafras Tea, under the name of 'Saloop,' could, until a few years ago, be bought at London streetcorners in the early mornings.

SASSAFRAS PITH (*Sassafras medulla*) is only official in the United States. It is usually found in thin, cylindrical pieces, which are light and spongy, white and insipid. Its principal constituent is mucilage, which may be prepared by adding 60 grains of the pith to a pint of boiling water. This remains limpid when alcohol is added. It is used as a demulcent, especially for inflammation of the eyes, and as a soothing drink in catarrhal affection.

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---**Constituents**---The root-bark contains a heavy and a light volatile oil, camphorous matter, resin, wax a decomposition product of tannic acid called Sassafrid, tannic acid, gum, albumen, starch, lignin and salts. Sassafrid bears some analogy to cinchonic red. The bark yields from 6 to 9 per cent of oil, of which the chief constituent is Safrol (80 per cent). It is one of the heaviest of the volatile oils, and when cold deposits four- or six-sided prisms of Sassafras camphor, which retain the odour. It should be preserved in well-stoppered, amber-coloured bottles, away from the light. Three bushels of the root yield about 1 lb.

Safrol has been found to be one of those bodies which can exist either in a solid or a liquid condition long after freezing or melting-point. Chemically, it has been found to be the methylene ether of allyl-dioxibene. It is found in many other species, is now commercially extracted from oil of Camphor, and could possibly be obtained from some members of the Cinnamomum family. Physiologically and therapeutically it is equivalent to oil of Sassafras.

Oil of Sassafras is *chiefly* used for flavouring purposes, particularly to conceal the flavour of opium when given to children. In the United States of America it is employed for flavouring

effervescing drinks.

---Medicinal Action and Uses---Aromatic, stimulant, diaphoretic, alterative. It is rarely given alone, but is often combined with guaiacum or sarsaparilla in chronic rheumatism, syphilis, and skin diseases.

The oil is said to relieve the pain caused by menstrual obstructions, and pain following parturition, in doses of 5 to 10 drops on sugar, the same dose having been found useful in gleet and gonorrhoea.

Safrol is found to be slowly absorbed from the alimentary canal, escaping through the lungs unaltered, and through the kidneys oxidized into piperonic acid.

A teaspoonful of the oil produced vomiting, dilated pupils, stupor and collapse in a young man.

It is used as a local application for wens and for rheumatic pains, and it has been praised as a dental disinfectant.

Its use has caused abortion in several cases.

Dr. Shelby of Huntsville stated that it would both prevent and remove the injurious effects of tobacco.

A lotion of rose-water or distilled water, with Sassafras Pith, filtered after standing for four hours, is recommended for the eyes.

---Dosage---Of fluid extract, 1/2 to 1 drachm. Of Sassafras bark, 1 to 2 drachms. Of oil of Sassafras, 1 to 5 drops. Mucilage, U.S.P., 4 drachms.

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---Poison and Antidotes---The oil can produce marked narcotic poisoning, and death by causing widespread fatty degeneration of the heart, liver, and kidneys, or, in a larger dose, by great depression of the circulation, followed by a centric paralysis of respiration.

---Other Species---The name is also applied to the following:

BLACK SASSAFRAS, or *Oliveri Cortex* (Oliver's Bark), a substitute for cinnamon in Australia.

SWAMP SASSAFRAS, or *Magnolia glauca*, an aromatic, diaphoretic, tonic bitter.

AUSTRALIAN SASSAFRAS, or *Atherosperma moschatum*, a powerful poison, useful in rheumatism, syphilis and bronchitis.

SASSAFRAS GOESIANUM, or *Massoja aromatica*, yielding Massoi Bark.

CALIFORNIA SASSAFRAS, or *Umbellularia californica*, the leaves of which are employed in headache, colic and diarrhoea.

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