



Seeing the Sourlands Sassafras Tree

What is the most beautiful flowering tree in the Sourland forest? White Flowering Dogwood would probably get the most votes, but some of us would argue that the Sassafras deserves consideration for that honor. The Sassafras flowers are light yellow and fairly ordinary looking, but they grow in drooping clusters beneath a cup of leaves that look exactly like what they are: new babies, pale green with tinges of pink and yellow and covered with a downy fuzz, facing the world for the first time.

Sassafras trees are not tolerant of deep shade so they are found on edges or in canopy gaps in the forest or as a part of a hedgerow in a farm field. They form dense hedgerows because their principal way of propagating is to send new shoots off of their roots.

There are many components to the aroma of the forest—soil, previous years' vegetation mouldering on the forest floor, and many of the trees and shrubs—but

when Sassafras trees are present that aroma is at its best. Legend has it that Christopher Columbus knew he was approaching a landmass in 1492 because he could smell Sassafras trees long before land was visible. The aroma comes from all parts of the tree but can most easily be experienced by scratching the bark on a twig.

During America's colonial era Sassafras was the second most important export crop to England (tobacco was number one). Native Americans used its leaves as a poultice for wounds and boiled the bark to make an orange dye. For many years Europeans used it (unsuccessfully) as a cure for sexually transmitted diseases. Root beer was made from the roots. (Root beer is now made from a chemical compound because there is concern that Sassafras oil is carcinogenic.) The wood was highly prized for building barrels, posts, and small boats. Its oil was used to make soap. Other materials are now used for all of those products. People still occasionally make tea by boiling the leaves, outer bark and roots.