

# A historical look at the sassafrass plant

• Bring ivy in for rooting. Vines trailing from a graceful vase make a refreshing green arrangement for the house. After rooting, plant outside about one-half inch beneath the soil. Three rooted cuttings per square yard is suggested.



## BEYOND THE WEEDS

by Jean Winslow

• Check boxwood, hollies, azaleas, gardenias, roses and rhododendrons for nematodes. This condition is identified by poor growth, low vigor, yellowing or bronzing, loss of leaves, stem die-back and failure to respond to fertilizer.

• Sunflower seeds discarded by birds at feeding stations should not be added to the compost pile. Like walnut trees and several other plants, sunflower seeds secrete a substance that inhibits growth of surrounding plants.

• Got a sunny window sill? Try some winter postage stamp gardening. You can grow parsley, cherry tomatoes, chives, radishes and basil.

Use a basic potting soil, provide steady moisture, adequate drainage, regular fertilizer and you'll have a teeny culinary treat for the whole family.

Hidden in one corner of our yard are the compost piles, "Old Pile" (or Big Guy), "New Pile" and "Whew Pile," the latter still retaining to some degree aromas such as left-over cabbage from last night and maybe this morning's coffee grounds.

About the middle of September we turn everything over with a spreading fork, preparatory to dressing the winter garden with "Old Pile." This requires chopping through a dense layer of Vinca major and cutting down various saplings that have presumed upon the premises during the summer.

I was quite surprised by the number of sassafrass suckers that had taken over one corner. While cutting back these intruders I chewed a piece and enjoyed its almost-forgotten taste.

There's a lot to be said for sassafrass. In fact, a lot of it I'm not sure I even believe.

First of all, a little background. Sassafrass is in the laurel family. It is a small tree usually, but capable of becoming quite tall in the South. Luxuriously fragrant flowers bloom in April and May before its leaves appear.

Outstanding, however, is its flamboyant autumn color. One of the great pleasures of canoeing here on the Perquimans River is drinking in the red, yellow and oranges of sassafrass and other showoffs, including the sumacs, that thrive in the dry woods on each side.

These are our substitutes for the fall showing of various hardwoods, which are located in other areas of the state.

Thousands of years before Spaniards supposedly discovered sassafrass (they called it salsafrass) while simultaneously supposedly discovering Florida, Indians in the Great Lakes region of North America had been making tea of its leaves and boiling its bark in water for a medicine to reduce fever. That, it seems, is only the beginning.

Joan Parry Dutton, "Plants of Colonial Williamsburg," explains that French Huguenots in South Carolina are credited with naming it sassafrass.

Claimed a cure-all by Dr. Nicholas Monardes, a Spanish physician, the dried root bark began selling at increasingly higher prices. It became the oldest commercialized crop in North America.

She goes on to say that Hariot, having found the tree growing on Roanoke Island, described it as "a wood of the most sweet and pleasant smell and of rare virtues in medicine for the cure of many diseases." Captain John Smith exported sassafrass back to the Mother Country.

At that time, says Mother Earth Magazine July/August 1983, sassafrass did all of the following: soothed chronic rheumatism, gout and dropsy, relieved eye inflammation, eased various femal complaints, acted as a disinfectant in dental surgery, cured several skin conditions and scurvy.

I would think ingesting a cupful of boiled root bark would be a more palatable way to cure scurvy than the Russian method. They would carefully cut up and eat raw onions upon which they squirted lemon juice. The skin of the lemon was sweet.

Possibly this is why the Russians

only get along with themselves — who else could ever come near enough to propose friendship?

The volatile oil of sassafrass was mixed with boiling water for many purposes. Only four or five drops were utilized at one time, however, as more of the substance would cause vomiting, dilated pupils, stupor, spontaneous abortions and collapse — perhaps even death.

The FDA in the 60's fed 600 pounds of dried sassafrass to three mice over a four day period and pronounced that the chemical constituent safrole could cause liver cancer in rats. So there was a brief ban on the sale of sassafrass tea.

However, nutmeg, pepper, star anise and ordinary China tea were still sold. They also contained safrole. Maybe you can figure it out.

I like sassafrass, both the taste and the odor. I am particularly addicted to Creole cookery and cannot imagine a gumbo, sans file powder, which is dried and ground sassafrass leaves used for thickening, flavoring and aroma.

Sassafrass keeps root beer from tasting like Dr. Pepper.

There are also sassafrass candy sticks, presumably still a best-seller in Williamsburg.

I can see why Columbus was successful in pacifying his mutinous crew, convincing them that land was near when the fragrance of sassafrass trees wafted over strange waters.

That fragrance was something

they could identify with, since for the last three weeks they were getting more and more discouraged, more depressed, more confused. Even the graffiti was frustrating:

They had referred to earlier ships' logs, pured over every code book in the Admiralty, all in vain. Until God or Isabella enabled them to translate "See Rock City" into Spanish, there was no way of knowing who the real enemy was.



The first all-professional U.S. baseball team was founded in 1870. Its members were known at that time as the Cincinnati Red Stockings.

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