

Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) is native to eastern North America from Southern Ontario, Canada through eastern United States south to central Florida and west to Southern Iowa and eastern Texas. It is a medium sized tree to about 60 feet tall with a trunk 2 - 3 feet in diameter and spread of 25 - 40 feet. It grows in sun or partial sun, as an understory tree, in USA zones 4-9. Leaves are alternate, simple, and aromatic; 4 - 6" long and 2 - 4" broad. Although most trees in the Lauraceae family are evergreen, sassafras is deciduous. All parts of the tree are fragrant. A unique feature is the fact that the species has 3 types of leaves: unlobed oval, bilobed mitten shape (right or left-handed), and trilobed. The leaf color in spring is yellow green above and pale, pubescent, bluish green below, with a lemony fragrance.

The species name, *albidum*, means white referring to the hairy undersides of the leaves. In the fall leaves turn vivid colors of orange and red. The bark of a mature tree is thick, reddish brown, fragrant and deeply furrowed. The wood is light, fragrant, and brittle during high winds or hard freezes. The small greenish yellow flowers which bloom in the spring have 5 petals. They are dioecious with female and male flowers on separate trees. Blue-black fruit about 3/8" long matures in the summer on red stems of female trees. The sassafras tree in my front yard is about fifteen years old now and started to colonize several years ago with seedlings emerging as much as six to ten feet away from the original tree.

In 1960 the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) prohibited the use of safrole, the main constituent in sassafras. Studies showed safrole to be metabolized as a liver toxin and carcinogen. Ironic since sassafras was originally used a blood purifier and spring tonic in America. Lesley Bremness in *Herbs: the visual guide to more than 700 herb species from around the world*, states "Safrole in sassafras root beer, now banned in the USA, is only 1/14th as carcinogenic as the ethanol in ordinary beer."

Safrole is present in nutmeg and mace in very small amounts that are allowed by the FDA. They also approve as GRAS (generally recognized as safe) the use of sassafras leaves as the seasoning *file* for Cajun gumbo, soup, and stew recipes. Essential oil from sassafras roots has 74 to 80% safrole for a warm-spicy, woody-floral fragrance used in perfumes, soaps, and, of course, potpourri.

According to Susan Betz in her book, *Magical Moons & Seasonal Circles*, the sassafras tree helped Columbus discover America. It was the suddenly wafting scent of fragrant sassafras signaling that land was near that lifted the spirits of the nearly mutinous crew. Until outlawed by the FDA, sassafras was used in root beer, gum and as an antiseptic or pain killer in dentistry.

According to Wikipedia, safrole has been used in the last two decades as a major ingredient in the manufacture of MDA, MDMA and MDEA. You may recognize these drugs by the street name Ecstasy. "X" is one of the most popular recreational drugs in the world and most often associated with dancing or raves. It is said to reduce anxiety, increase intimacy and the feeling of euphoria. Clinical trials are testing MDMA for treating post-traumatic stress syndrome and to provide lasting pain relief and improved quality of life in terminal cancer patients. It has beneficial therapeutic uses to ease the stress of patients under psychotherapy. Small doses are said to be used by Buddhist monks to enhance meditation.

Note: a very small amount of sassafras root bark can be purchased from online sources in 2023 at exorbitant prices. If you wish to buy a large quantity, be prepared to answer to the FDA and Department of Justice as to what you might be doing with sassafras!

Creole Crab Bisque

3/4 cup butter
3/4 cup flour
3 tbsp. tomato paste
1 1/2 cups chopped onion
1 cup chopped celery
1/2 cup chopped scallions
4 cloves garlic, pressed
2/3 cup chopped green pepper
3 tbsp. chopped fresh parsley
2 quarts chicken stock
1 tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
1 bay leaf
1 tbsp. fresh thyme
1 tsp. salt
1/8 tsp. white pepper
1/8 tsp. cayenne pepper
1/2 tsp. catsup
1 pound fresh lump crabmeat
1-2 teaspoons filé

In a large pot, melt the butter and gradually add flour, stirring constantly until roux is golden brown (20–30 minutes).

Add tomato paste, onions, celery, green pepper, scallions, and garlic. Cook until tender; add parsley.

Slowly stir in stock. Add Worcestershire sauce, bay leaf, thyme, salt, peppers, and catsup. Stir in crabmeat.

Cover and simmer for 40 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat onto a cold surface. Gently stir in the filé powder and serve immediately. Stirring filé powder into boiling or very hot foods will cause it to get stringy. You may also stir a bit onto the top of the Bisque as you serve it.

Adapted from a Terri Reiman recipe in The Essential Guide to Growing and Cooking with Herbs. She was a member of the Roanoke Valley Unit.

Traditional Jambalaya

Serves: 4 to 6

Ingredients

2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
1-2 tablespoons Cajun seasoning (or make your own; see below)
10 ounces andouille sausage, sliced into rounds
1 pound boneless skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1 inch pieces
½ pound shrimp
1 onion, coarsely chopped
1 small green bell pepper, coarsely chopped
2 stalks celery, sliced
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 (16 ounce) can crushed Italian tomatoes
½ teaspoon red pepper flakes, if your Cajun spice isn't strong enough
½ teaspoon ground black pepper
1 teaspoon sea salt
½ teaspoon Tabasco sauce
2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
1 ¼ cups uncooked white rice
2 ½-3 cups chicken or vegetable broth
1-2 teaspoons file powder (hold until just before serving)

Homemade Cajun Seasoning

2 tablespoons smoked paprika
2 tablespoons garlic powder
1-2 teaspoons cayenne, to taste
2 tablespoons dried oregano
1 teaspoon dried thyme
1 tablespoons onion powder
1 tablespoon kosher salt
2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper

Blend ingredients in a small bowl, transfer to a glass jar with a lid. Store with your other spices.

Directions:

1. Get your ingredients together (prepare meats, shrimp, chop vegetables, measure spices, rice, and broth) before starting to make the job a little easier.
2. Heat half of the olive oil in a heavy Dutch oven over medium heat. Put sausage into a medium bowl and coat with the Cajun seasoning. Sauté sausage until browned. Remove to a clean bowl and set aside.
3. Add remaining olive oil, and sauté chicken pieces until lightly browned on all sides. Remove to bowl with sausage and set aside.

4. In the same pot, sauté onion, bell pepper, celery, and garlic until tender.
5. Stir in crushed tomatoes, and season with red pepper, black pepper, salt, Tabasco sauce, and Worcestershire sauce.
6. Stir in chicken and sausage. Cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
7. Stir in the uncooked rice and chicken broth.
8. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer for 20 minutes.
9. Toss in shrimp and continue heating for another 6-7 minutes. The broth should be mostly absorbed, but if too thick, add a enough broth for a slightly soupy consistency.
10. JUST BEFORE SERVING: Remove pan from heat onto a cool surface. Gently stir in the filé powder then ladle into large somewhat flat bowls and serve with good cornbread.
11. Note: the filé powder lends a slightly earthy flavor and helps to thicken the Jambalaya. If it is stirred into boiling soup or stew, it will get stringy and be a bit unappetizing.

Submitted by member Susan Gail Wood