

Phenophase Photo Guide

Sassafras albidum (Sassafras)

Why Observe?

Sassafras is a short to medium-tall shrub/tree from the Laurel family (9 -18 m or 30-60 ft). It produces three distinct shapes of leaves: oval, two-lobed like a mitten, and three-lobed and symmetrical with broad, rounded sinuses. The leaves are waxy, glossy, and produce an aromatic mucilage. Sassafras wood has limited commercial use, but may be used for fence posts, rails, and indoor furniture.

Sassafras supports and is pollinated by butterflies and native bees. Sassafras twigs and fruits are consumed by diverse wildlife throughout all seasons. Sassafras is also a good indicator species studied by various partners in the Northeast.



Tips for Identification:

Besides its 3 shapes of leaves, the Sassafras flowers emerge simultaneously with leaves and appear yellow-green and leafy in texture. Fruits appear a green-reddish color when first emerging and ripen to a purplish, blue-ish, or black color.

Habitat:

A common successional shrub/tree that needs sun found on abandoned farmlands and other anthropogenic or disturbed settings as well as forests and forest edges.

Special Consideration:

Black bears, beaver, rabbits, and squirrels eat the fruit, bark and wood. Sassafras fruits are eaten by many bird species. Look for the cocoons of [Promethea moths](#) in Winter.



Information presented in this guide was compiled from the [USA-NPN](#), [Native Plant Trust's GoBotany](#), the [FEIS Database](#) and [EWA records](#).



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Breaking leaf buds

One or more breaking leaf buds are visible on the plant. A leaf bud is considered "breaking" once a green leaf tip is visible at the end of the bud, but before the first leaf from the bud has unfolded to expose the leaf stalk (petiole) or leaf base.

Note: In the photo, the leaf bud is at the right of the flower cluster.



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Leaves

One or more live, unfolded leaves are visible on the plant. A leaf is considered "unfolded" once its entire length has emerged from a breaking bud, stem node or growing stem tip, so that the leaf stalk (petiole) or leaf base is visible at its point of attachment to the stem. Do not include fully dried or dead leaves.



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Increasing leaf size

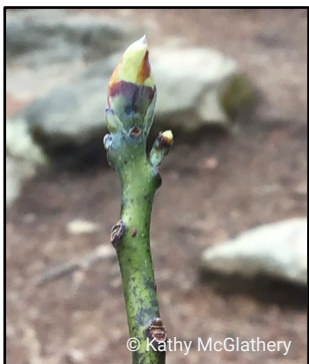
A majority of leaves on the plant have not yet reached their full size and are still growing larger. Do not include new leaves that continue to emerge at the ends of elongating stems throughout the growing season.



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Colored leaves

One or more leaves show some of their typical late-season color, or yellow or brown due to drought or other stresses. Do not include small spots of color due to minor leaf damage, or dieback on branches that have broken. Do not include fully dried or dead leaves that remain on the plant.



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Flowers or flower buds

One or more fresh open or unopened flowers or flower buds are visible on the plant. Include flower buds or inflorescences that are swelling or expanding, but do not include those that are tightly closed and not actively growing (dormant). Do not include wilted or dried flowers.



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Open flowers

One or more open, fresh flowers are visible on the plant. Flowers are considered "open" when the reproductive parts (male stamens or female pistils) are visible between or within unfolded or open flower parts (petals, floral tubes or sepals). Do not include wilted or dried flowers.



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Fruits

One or more fruits are visible on the plant. For *Sassafras albidum*, the fruit is a drupe. It is berry-like and changes from green to red-green to purplish-red to blue-black.



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Ripe fruits

One or more ripe fruits are visible on the plant. For *Sassafras albidum*, a fruit is considered ripe when it has turned blue-black.

Note: The ripe fruit is cupped atop a bright red stalk.

Phenophases not pictured: Falling leaves, Recent fruit or seed drop *If you are uncertain whether or not a phenophase is occurring, report a "?" for its status until it becomes clear what you are observing after subsequent visits.*