

*SASSAFRAS ALBIDUM (SASSAFRAS)***

Painting by Wendy Cortesi

Artist's Statement:

I was first drawn to the sassafras tree's interesting multi-shaped leaves. Although sassafras is not particularly eye catching at any time during it's growing season, when one combines the yellow spring flowers, green leaves, bright blue and red fruits, orange roots and yellow, orange and red fall leaves into one painting, the result is a vivid array of color.

My sassafras painting was largely based on color studies, photographs, and collected specimens of plants in the wild found in Catoctin Mountain Park, the National Arboretum and various places in Virginia. I recorded my observations throughout the plant's annual cycle.

Recently, I have been painting on 300-pound, soft press, Fabriano Uno watercolor paper. This paper is acid free, does not buckle in humid conditions and has a slightly textured finish between hot and cold press. I also use distilled water and the most stable and lightfast watercolor paints available. I do not use any cadmium colors, which may be unstable in damp conditions, or ultramarine blue, which actually disappears when touched with anything acidic. I occasionally use masking fluid to protect fine detail, as well as pens with watercolor instead of ink. I do not currently combine watercolor with colored pencil or gouache.

Medicinal Uses:

Sassafras albidum is indigenous to eastern North America. All parts of the plant are aromatic with the rough root being the most strongly scented. Its distinctive root-beer smell remains long after the root is cut and dried out. A note of caution: The tree often

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grows among large poison ivy vines and the similar looking roots can be intertwined. The sassafras root, however, has a bright orange interior color and a strong scent.

Sassafras is an important plant for many animals. The leaves, twigs, and fruits are eaten by a number of mammals, birds and insects. This painting includes a female *Pterourus troilus* (spicebush swallowtail butterfly) and two forms of its mature larvae, or caterpillars. Sassafras is the preferred host plant for this butterfly. The adults feed from the flowers and the larvae eat the leaves. (Pyle, p. 345 - 346)

Early colonists boiled the roots with molasses and fermented the mixture to make root beer. Tea made from sassafras bark was used as a soothing drink or as a tonic to treat syphilis. Infusions from the leaves were used to treat skin eruptions.

Sassafras has also been used as a stimulant, pain reliever and treatment for rheumatism. Oil of sassafras has been used as a flavoring for foods, perfumes and soaps. Dried leaves have been powdered for a thickening agent and flavoring for foods. (www.sfrc.ufl.edu).

Mrs. Child's popular handbook, *The Family Nurse*, published in 1837, the year of Lucy's death, valued sassafras "as a warm stimulant and antispasmodic, producing perspiration. The oil obtained from the bark is preferred to a decoction, because the virtues of the plant partially evaporate by boiling. A few drops should be taken, mixed with sweetened water or syrup. The bark and young twigs abound with mild, delicate mucilage, much used in decoction as a wash for inflamed eyes, likewise very soothing drink for catarrh, gravelley affections, and inflamed state of the bowels. Mixed with pumpkin-seed it makes an excellent tea for strangury [painful urination]." (Childs, p.111)

It is now known that sassafras contains the compound safrole which is carcinogenic and hepatotoxic. It is no longer used to flavor root beer and should not be used internally. (Foster and Duke, p.314; Audubon Trees, p. 451; Segelman et al)