

NTFPs from Trees: Nontimber Forest Products that Support our Society and Economy

SASSAFRAS

Products: Spice and condiment

Plant Parts Used: Leaves and bark of shoots and roots



Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum* [Nutt.] Nees) grows best in open woods on moist, well-drained, sandy loam soils and can be a pioneer species in old fields, along fences, and on dry ridges. It can be found in more than 28 States from Maine to Texas (shown in green on the map below) and has its largest forms in the Great Smoky Mountains. It is found commonly with sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), hickories (*Carya* spp.), oaks (*Quercus* spp.), and yellow poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*).



Key Points

- Sassafras is an under-utilized and under-recognized tree species with economic value in specialty health and culinary sectors of the forest products industry.
- Since 2006, there has been a 31-percent decrease in the estimated average number of sassafras trees per acre of forest land across the species' range.
- Over 80 percent of the States within the range of sassafras realized a negative net change in the species over the period 2002–2017.

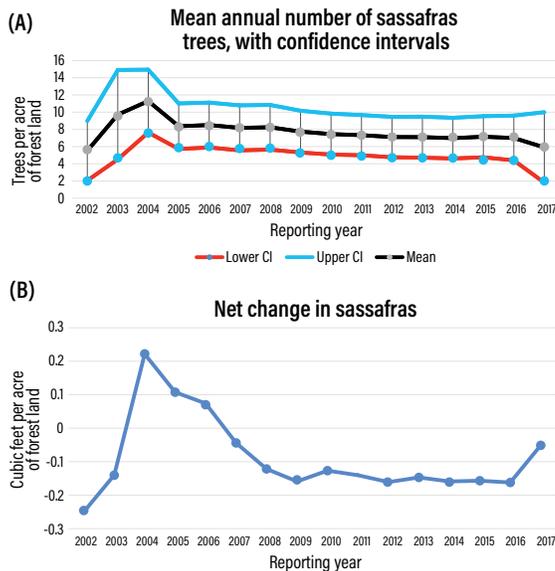
Nontimber Uses

- Native Americans used sassafras as a tonic and herb to treat ailments and for food, furniture, and a variety of other purposes.
- Sassafras was one of the first cash crops exported from the Virginia Colony to Europe for its curative properties and as a beverage ingredient.
- Oil extracted from sassafras roots was once used to flavor root beer and baked goods.
- Sassafras leaves and roots are used for thickening soups, and its essential oils are used to scent soaps.
- Filé, a favored spice in Cajun cuisine, is made from dried and ground sassafras leaves.

Markets

- There is little documentation of the markets for sassafras, but it has been of commercial value for a long time.
- The primary markets for sassafras are specialty health and culinary enterprises.
- Buyers of bulk, raw sassafras material for the spice trade are scattered across the country.
 - ▲ Firms can be found in Indiana, Michigan, California, and Colorado, and are not bound to be the source of the product.
 - ▲ Most of these firms are not readily identified or recognized as part of the forest products industry.

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Status

- Sassafras appears in Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) plots across 28 States, with the most trees per acre of forest land found in Indiana, Kentucky, and Illinois.
- Indiana also has the greatest volume of sassafras per acre, along with Ohio and Tennessee. Estimated mean annual volume for 2002–2017 was about 7.59 cubic feet per acre per year.
- Greatest mean annual growth between 2002 and 2017 was exhibited in Indiana, as well. Illinois and New Jersey also had large mean annual growth.
- Overall, the greatest positive net change (i.e., difference between growth and sum of mortality and removals) for 2002–2017 was estimated in Rhode Island, followed by Michigan.
- The estimated mean annual number of sassafras trees per acre of forest land declined from 2006 through 2017, from >8.5 trees per acre in 2006 to <6 trees per acre (see chart [A]).
- Over 80 percent of the States with sassafras in FIA plots reported negative net change between 2002 and 2017 (see chart [B]), with Maryland having the greatest negative net change.

Management and Implications

- Sassafras is susceptible to the laurel wilt disease, which results from a fungus (*Raffaelea lauricola*) carried by the invasive redbay ambrosia beetle (*Xyleborus glabratus*). As of 2019, laurel wilt had been found from Texas to North Carolina, and from Florida into Kentucky.
- Estimated mortality and removals have exceeded estimated growth over most of the years examined, indicating a decline in overall population and health of the species.
- FIA scientists estimate that about 40 percent of the sassafras trees measured in the 2009 FIA survey in Georgia had died by 2014.
- Sassafras is an under-recognized and under-utilized resource that has significant ecological and economic values.

References

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