

Kentucky Big Tree Program

You Bet Your Sweet Sassafras



All photos courtesy of Kentucky Division of Forestry



This state and national champion is the largest known sassafras in the world.

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By Diana L. Olszowy

Located near the corner of the 2100 block of South Frederica Street in Owensboro stands the oldest giant sassafras in the country. It is also the largest known sassafras tree in the world. This giant tree, which professional foresters have estimated to be 300 years old, has been saved from destruction on several occasions.

Sassafras belongs to the laurel family, of which most members are tropical, broad-leaved evergreens. Many have aromatic substances in their leaves, stems, and roots. Tropical cousins to sassafras provide a source of spice, cinnamon, and camphor.

Sassafras trees growing wild were a blessing for the early settlers, furnishing wood for dugout canoes, a refreshing tea, and a “spring tonic” once thought to be a cure for many ills. Historically, oil extracted from the roots and bark was said to have “magical” medicinal powers that could heal the lame, prolong life, and cure malaria, fevers, colds, headaches, stomachaches, and liver aches. Sassafras extract is still used for tea and has served as a flavoring agent for root beer, sarsaparilla, and other soft drinks. It is also used to flavor candies and medicines and as a perfume for soaps. Louisiana Creole chefs still use dried and crushed young sassafras leaves to flavor filé gumbo, a famous rice and chicken, ham, or oyster dish.

Sassafras bark was one of the first exports of the Jamestown Colony. By the time the merchants marketed their shiploads of sassafras, the price had risen to 335 English pounds per ton, equivalent to more than \$25,000 a ton today. Of course, the bottom fell out of the market when the fanciful claims were disproved.

This state and national champion sassafras in Kentucky escaped the bark and root harvests only to be threatened by the widening of South Frederica Street in 1957. When the bulldozers came, owner Grace Rash was waiting with her shotgun. She held them off at gunpoint until a call to then Governor A. B. “Happy” Chandler resulted in the building of a retaining wall to protect the tree. Governor Chandler pardoned the sassafras, and as the street was widened, the tree was left unscathed.

The American Forestry Association named the tree the “biggest sassafras in the country” in 1951, and today it is an historical landmark.

Each autumn the tree blazes with a fiery cloak of color. It may not cure your rheumatism, but it’s definitely a sight for sore eyes. If you happen to drive past this magnificent tree, look carefully. Oddly enough, the tree is not too apparent in spite of its size. It measures 22.5 feet in circumference and is 77 feet tall!