



## Linden

Linden is always a joy to find anywhere you go. A tree with a gentle spirit and incredibly useful offerings, the Linden is there for you. The Linden species (*Tilia spp.*) includes 30 species of shrubs and bushes that can be found throughout the temperate Northern Hemisphere. Lindens are also known as Basswood, Whitewood, Spoonwood, or Lime Tree and here in Northern Appalachia, the “Basswood” and “Linden” names are used fairly interchangeably.

### Linden magic

- **Air Magic.** Linden’s association as a “humming tree,” the way its leaves blow and shine in the breeze, the yellow of its flowers, and the flower growth habit all speak to the close association of this tree with the element of air. If you are doing any workings that focus on air and air magic, Linden is an excellent tree to work with.
- **Alchemy.** The Linden’s deep association with bees, who are nature’s alchemists, and its connection with Honey signifies a deeper connection with alchemy and transformation. Linden has many ways in which it can be transformed: into cordage, food, medicine, Honey, drink, or carvings, and all of these are rooted in the tree’s innate qualities. Linden, thus, is an excellent tree for magical workings tied to alchemy and transformation either on the inner or outer planes.
- **Binding.** As Linden’s extensive use for creating ropes, cordage, and other materials that bind, Linden offers this energy energetically. You can use Linden to hold something fast to you, to tie something together, or to bind something that needs bound. All of these uses still require human action to bring the binding or cordage together. You can also use Linden in knot magic, magical crafts, or other ways of keeping something together.

### Linden Divination

- **Air Magic.** Linden is closely tied to the element of air. Matters of the air include those focusing on logic, using your knowledge, using the rational mind to make decisions, keeping emotions at bay, and practical applied wisdom. Draw upon the strengths of the element of air to help you navigate the situation at play. Consider bringing some air magic into your life at this time: feathers, incense, birds, and more.
- **Alchemy.** The ancient practice of alchemy was the art of transformation, transmutation, and purification. It is through deep practices that we can transmute our pain and negative experiences into something better than before. Consider how the work of Alchemy may be necessary in your circumstances, or consider how you might draw upon lessons learned from previous transformations in the present situation.
- **Binding.** When you draw Linden in a reading, this may signify that binding is a part of the situation. Perhaps you are feeling trapped in a situation, or you’ve given a binding vow and now you cannot escape. Or perhaps you are holding fast to someone else, making them feel bound. Consider how this binding may be a positive force or one that needs to be ended.



## Ecology

*Tilia americana*, known as the American Linden or American Basswood tree, has a native range spanning from Tennessee to Maine, across Ontario, and into the edges of Montana through Oklahoma—quite far ranging indeed. The Linden is most often found in deciduous forests along with Sugar Maples and prefers a higher pH. The bark is distinct, either light gray or brown with thin fissures running up and down. The leaves are asymmetrical and heart shaped; they look like a lobsided heart where one part of the leaf is larger than the other. The leaves are 6-10 inches long and are alternatively ranged on the branch. The leaves are shiny on top and duller underneath, and when the tree blows in the wind, you can often see them twisting and shimmering in the breeze. The leaves produce a nutrient-rich leaf litter which is a favorite of gardeners and permaculturists for use in their gardens.

Most people can identify Linden due to the flowers—each one drops from a yellow-white bract (looking like a single leaf) with 6-20 small white flowers with five symmetrically arranged petals. The flowers are distinct not only in the beautiful display and aroma, but also because they require exactly 14-hour and 30-minute days to form, thus, Lindens only grow north of the 35<sup>th</sup> parallel in latitude in North America. Unlike most trees that bloom later the further north you go, Linden blooms opposite—they bloom earliest at the top of their range in Ontario and bloom into mid-to-late June at the southern end of their range, based on the available daylight. The Linden flowers turn to seeds, which can stay present on the Linden for into midwinter.

Linden is often associated with both domestic and wild Honeybees—bees are the primary pollinators of Linden. Linden is sometimes known as a “humming tree” due to the number of insects she draws while in flower. Linden flowers are fragrant and produce a beautifully rich and delicious Honey, in which a single tree in one season can attract tens of thousands of bees and insects. As John Eastman notes in *Book of Forest and Thicket*, Linden produces some of the finest Honey in North America. In the wild, hollow Linden trees were a common place for wild bee colonies to be found. The white wood of the Linden tree is also made into beehive frames.





Seed pods are often eaten by a variety of animals including mice, squirrels, and chipmunks. Rabbits and voles prefer the bark of young Linden trees, which can require protection from them killing the trees. The *Bucculatrix improvisa*, a golden-brown moth, only feeds on the trees in the *Tilia* species, and then the moth creates a yellow cocoon on an underside of the leaf and overwinters until spring.

Linden trees have staying power. Even if a Linden is cut down, like the American Hazelnut, she can spring forth from her stump and regenerate. Linden grows extremely deep taproots and also has a wide lateral root structure—this means a Linden is almost never blown down in a storm but stays firm.

While Linden is a desirable tree, it is extremely difficult to propagate from seed (only 30% of the seeds are viable and due to a hard seed coating, they can take 2-3 years to germinate). Thus, Lindens are often propagated through cuttings and grafting, which suggests that humans may have been at least partially responsible for the spread of these trees well before colonial times.

### Human Uses: Wood and Fiber

Linden wood is white, fine grained, and soft. It is a common wood for use in woodburning and carving; often when you visit a hobby store and purchase blocks of carving wood or wood for burning, it is Linden (sometimes labeled as Basswood or Whitewood). As mentioned above, this beautiful wood is also a very traditional wood for making Honey frames as well as boxes and wagon boxes. Linden is often also used for the body of electric guitars (along with Aspen). But due to its soft nature, most of its commercial uses are for carving and woodburning.

The term “Basswood” is derived from the cambium (inner bark) which is an excellent source of “bast” or fiber. Cordage from Linden trees was found at the Glacial Kame site in Canada (cordage with copper beads) and the Ohio Hopewell site (textiles), suggesting that Indigenous Americans had an extremely longstanding relationship with this useful tree, which traditionally would be harvested in the spring when the sap was flowing and the cambium was easy to slip off of the tree. The inner fiber of Linden is one of the best trees in North America for producing ropes, cordage, nets, mats, textiles, and other applications where a pliable inner bark is needed. John Smith reports that Native Americans living in Virginia would spin and braid the fibers to make threads that were used for nets, arrow shafts, housing, apparel, and for fishing gear. The Ojibwe would use it to lash together wigwams and medicine lodges. The Algonquin peoples were known to use Linden to weave straw mats that were used as a roof for shelters. The Menominee used it so extensively that H. Smith reports that balls of the twine were kept in every household. Many of these applications continued into colonial America and are kept alive today in the modern bushcraft and earth skills communities.

Finally, Linden has a very large amount of foliage and can produce a very deep shade when full grown; due to this and their bee-attracting capabilities, they are traditionally planted on the windward side of orchards to help break the wind and help attract insect pollinators.

### Human Uses: Edible and Perfumery

Linden flowers have a range of medicinal and edible uses both contemporarily and traditionally. The flowers can be enjoyed fresh or distilled, and turned into both an essential oil



and a perfume. They have a very delicate, almost Honey smell, that is just wonderful for this use; when distilled the sweetness also is complimented by a slightly spicy flavor. Linden seed pods (after the flowers are done blooming) can be pressed for oil in large quantities.

Linden leaves are edible and have long been enjoyed by both human and livestock. As with other edible tree species (such as Maple), the leaves are best when they are young and tender. You can eat them later in the season, but they get tougher as they get older. Linden leaves were used as a cooking aid by the Iroquois, as reported by Charlotte Erichsen-Brown: the Iroquois used cornmeal and boiled pumpkin and mixed with berries (Blackberry or Huckleberry). They would line the entire pan with Linden leaves and bake this into a bread.

A Linden flower tree is certainly a wonderful treat on a hot summer day and has a range of medicinal effects.

### Human Uses: Herbalism

Traditional Indigenous uses of Linden are for a range of issues including using the flowers for epilepsy, mouth sores, diarrhea, swelling, fevers, coughs, gastrointestinal issues, and more. The root of the Linden was used for burns by the Illinois-Miami. Linden flowers are commonly used in a medicinal tea for a variety of uses.

Following with the “bast” uses of the tree are medicinal applications: the Algonquin also used the inner bark in thin strands as a suture to sew up wounds. The Mohawk created a Linden tea with branches from Linden and Staghorn Sumac that was prepared in a special way for aiding childbirth, and the Iroquois also used the cambium as an emergency wound bandage.

Linden flowers are understood to be very gentle medicine, able to be used with children, nursing women, and those who are quite sick. Its uses in traditional Western herbalism include being used as a demulcent, relaxant, nervine, diaphoretic (regulating fever) and diuretic (helps support healthy kidney function and flush the body). It is predominantly used as a tea, often in combination with other medicine. For use as a nervine and relaxant, it can also be used in a bath for this purpose. It also works as a fantastic headache medicine, particularly useful on tension headaches. It can also be used to soothe gastric issues and also can be used to help support a fever (diaphoretic action).

Biomedical research has demonstrated that Linden flower tea has sedative effects in mice, which can aid in the increase of sleep (Aguirre-Hernández). This is consistent with longstanding traditional uses of Linden flowers.

### Recipe: Linden Flower Tea and Linden Honoring Song

Both this song and tea were taught to me by my sister, who is a fellow herbalist and nature lover, Briel Driscoll-Beaty.

#### *Linden Song*

“When you see her  
Thank the Linden  
Thank the Linden tree.  
For her leaves and for her flowers  
May her heart forever be free.”





### *Linden Tea recipe:*

1 cup Linden flowers, fresh or dry

1/4 cup Hawthorn berry, fresh or dry

1 teaspoon Cinnamon chips or a dash of Cinnamon powder

Add to at least 4 cups water, bring to a simmer, and simmer for 5 minutes covered.

You can use Honey to sweeten. This tea is excellent for sore throats, coughs, colds, congestion, and sinus issues. It is also an excellent magical tea for various rituals and magical workings!

### Craft: Linden Cordage

Learning how to make a bit of your own cordage is a very useful activity and has a range of both mundane and magical uses. You can use a Linden cordage for creating a special necklace, for ritual workings where you bind or hold something fast, or even for a handfasting where you want to bring two people together as one.

I recommend that you use a downed branch of Linden or one that requires to be pruned, which in an area where they are common, is not too difficult to find. The best cordage branches are those that have few knots and are straight. Spring is the traditional time to harvest material for cordage and is by far the easiest to process, but you can create it anytime you have access to the material.

Begin by stripping the bark from your branches (a small knife is very effective for this). The bark has two layers, the outer and inner layer, and you will want to separate these layers and avoid having any dark outer bark left on your inner fiber. If the material has dried out, it is useful to soak it (up to a day or more) and then try to separate it. Your goal is to create strips of the thin, inner green bark—the longer the strip, the bigger. For thin cordage, as would be appropriate for a necklace, you want to split the cambium into small strips about 1/4 - 1/6 inch each. The more consistent the size, the more consistent your cordage will be. Next, “buff” the strips to soften them: this is usually done by rubbing them between your hands or with your hand on your leg (wearing pants) for a time until the fibers loosen and get softer. The fibers will be ready to twist together when they are pliable.

To create your cordage, you will split a long fiber in half and start to twist it at the center of the fiber. Eventually, a little kink in the fiber will form—grab this kink in your non-dominant hand. Twist one of the fibers away from you, then move that fiber in the opposite direction that you twisted (toward you) and bring it over the second fiber. Now, twist the second fiber away from you, and move the first fiber back toward you. The key is that you will twist the individual fibers in one direction and twist the fibers together in the opposite—this creates a cord. As you twist, you will run out of fiber—2 inches before you do so, add a new fiber that you have prepared and twist the first into the second and just keep going. While this may sound complicated, once you get the hang of the two different twists, you can do this nearly effortlessly.

Once you’ve made your homemade cordage, consider using it to string a pendant (such as one of the charms listed in this book) or using it for some other magical purpose. Any time you want to hold energy or bind something would be a very appropriate use of Linden.



## PawPaw

The PawPaw has the unique quality of being the only native citrus tree we have in the temperate regions of Eastern North America and the Upper Midwest. However, it is quite unknown generally, compared to some of the other trees presented here (like Apple, Oak, or Maple). One of the reasons that PawPaw is probably not more well-known has, unsurprisingly, everything to do with the commercial viability of the fruits. PawPaw fruit is absolutely delicious, but it only stays good for a few days after harvest and thus, is ill-suited to modern industrial agriculture and distribution. The names for PawPaw include Appalachian Banana, Michigan Banana, Ozark Banana, Kentucky Banana, West Virginia Banana, American Custard Apple, Quaker Delight, Hillbilly Mango, and Poor Man's Banana which give some insight into this amazing tree.

### PawPaw Magic

- **Death.** PawPaw has connections to the world of the dead and the underworld for several reasons. The most important being that PawPaw has a carrion-smelling flower, that literally smells like fetid flesh, and that attracts flies and beetles as pollinators. The second way that PawPaw connects is also through the doctrine of signatures—the tree itself has very sparse leaves and a very open frame, showing the skeleton of the tree (the branches and trunk) rather than being covered by leaves. This connection allows you to use the flowers to connect with the dead, to speak with them, or to help them on their journey. It can also be used to help ease a difficult passing or for other work with the dead.
- **Transience.** Because PawPaw's fruit is so short-lived and transient, it reminds us of the transience or ephemeral nature of things. We can never get too comfortable or used to anything in life—the only certainty is the passage of time. If you need to work magic for a very short period of time—something just for the moment, something you do not want to last, consider drawing upon the energy of PawPaw.
- **Past.** PawPaw is a tree of a different time and is considered an anachronism, that is a tree that belongs to a previous time period, with an old-fashioned sense. You can use this tree for any workings dealing with the past, either recent or long term, or for working with history. This might include magic to connect to your own ancestors and ancestral legacy, past life workings, or uncovering secrets from the past.

### PawPaw Divination

- **Death.** All things must come to an end, and PawPaw in a reading signals that an ending has happened or is near. This can certainly be a physical death, but may also be a permanent and lasting change: leaving a place for good, leaving a job or profession, having someone leave your life, etc. Consider how this permanent and lasting change will impact you moving forward.
- **Transience.** Transience is another major theme for the PawPaw in a reading. A lack of permanence is at play in the current situation: regardless of how you feel about it, the present circumstance is a transient one. Change will inevitably occur. Sometimes we try too



hard to hold onto something that will not last and end up only hurting ourselves. Consider how transience may benefit you at this time.

- **Past.** In a reading, PawPaw may signal that the past (either recent or long past) has a significant bearing on the situation at present. This may be a sign of a family curse or problem, your own past coming back to haunt you, or some other significant situation or decision in the past that now is coming back into play in the present. It may also suggest a need to make peace with the past or attend to past issues in some way. While the past is always with us, it need not define our present.

## Ecology

PawPaw has a native range that spans from the edges of Texas and Oklahoma all across the Southeastern US into Georgia and Alabama and upward into Maryland and Pennsylvania. As a USDA Zone 5 fruiting tree, people have planted it as far as New England and the upper Midwest. PawPaw is one of the few fruit trees that can handle full shade, and when I've found it in the wild, that's typically where you find it: along quiet stream beds and river valleys, in damp and fertile flood plains, and deep in the shade of the overstory. PawPaw often spreads by roots to form a dense clonal colony—thus, when you find mature trees, you will often find a large patch of them growing closely together.

PawPaw is an understory tree, typically growing between 25-35 feet in height with trunks somewhere between 8-12 inches in diameter at full growth. The leaves typically grow only near the ends of the branches so PawPaw may look a bit sparse compared to other trees.

The flowers appear while the new leaves are coming forth in early spring. PawPaw flowers have three sepals (petal-like leaves) that surround six maroon flowers and bloom in mid-spring. Don't stick your nose in that maroon flower! PawPaws are predominately fly pollinated, which means that you do not want to sniff the flowers, as they often smell like rotting meat (I learned this the hard way). The PawPaw flower would be classified as a “carrion” flower due to this unique odor—it creates a stinking, fetid odor to attract flies and beetles that would pollinate





it. I will also note that the leaves and branches also may have a slightly fetid smell, so do keep this in mind as you work with this tree.

After spring pollination, the green fruits grow to the size of your hand or more, eventually dipping down the tender branches and dropping from the tree in September or October. Here in Western Pennsylvania, it is often late September that the fruit is ready to drop from the tree, just around the Fall Equinox. The fruits typically will fall from the tree while still green and ripen on the ground. This is when you can find them—pick them up on the ground green and then sit them on a counter or in a dark paper bag until ripe. Keep a good eye on them, as they will ripen quickly. Once they ripen, eat them fresh or process them into fruit leather, jam, pies, as they only stay ripe a few days before spoiling.

### 𐄂PawPaw as Anachronistic Fruit and Tree of the Ancestors

In “Anachronistic Fruits and the Ghosts Who Haunt Them,” Connie Barlow of the Harvard Arboretum gives a really interesting natural history of the PawPaw as what she terms an anachronistic fruit. Certain fruits, including PawPaw, Osage Orange, Persimmon, Honey Locust, and Kentucky Coffee Tree were originally eaten and spread by the “megafauna” at the end of the Pleistocene. These megafauna animals included mastodons, giant sloths, giant beavers, and others, who spread PawPaw fruits by ingesting and then pooping out the seeds. However, these animals went extinct at about 12,700 BCE, likely due to overhunting by humans.

Barlow notes that PawPaw and other anachronistic fruits developed clonal root spreading techniques when there was an absence of large megafauna seed spreaders. When humans came into North America at the end of the last Ice Age, they would have taken up the work of the megafauna and spread the seeds of these useful and edible trees. Thus, if you find a large PawPaw tree cluster in the wild, perhaps it was deposited there by ancient human ancestors of the land and spread naturally over time. And, anytime you are planting a new PawPaw tree by root cutting or seed, you are connecting with that ancient legacy. Thus, PawPaw is a tree with ancestral and ancient connections.

### 𐄂Human Uses: Food and Wood

PawPaw is a great wild or cultivated food. As permaculture, restoration agriculture, and food forestry gain ground, PawPaw has become a shining superstar for developing native perennial-based food systems here in North America. PawPaw trees are particularly good for areas where you have rich soil with shade and water.

As I mentioned above, the fruits typically fall from the trees in the fall. PawPaw fruits are usually higher than you can reach in mature stands, so you have to wait for them to fall onto the ground to collect. The fruits fall green and will naturally ripen on your counter in a few days. You can also pick them from the tree, but only if the tree is ready to give of its fruit—in other words, if the fruit is easy to pick from the tree, it is ready (just like harvesting other fruit, like Apple). If the fruit does not want to come off the tree, come back in a few days and try again—it is not ready.

The fruits are delicious when eaten raw. They have large seeds (which you can plant, but you need to keep them moist or else they lose viability—so plant just after eating!) You can also





create custards, pies, jams, and jellies from your PawPaws. There are two real keys to PawPaw. The first is that you have to process it fast: it's really only good for a few days on the counter (or maybe up to a week in the fridge) before it goes rotten, so you've got to use it while it lasts! The second key is that it is best used fresh, dried, or baked—so except for a good egg custard, I don't typically cook it much, as you do lose some of the flavors of the fruit.

Beyond its delicious fruit, PawPaw has a number of other bushcraft uses. PawPaw wood is very soft and fibrous, making it excellent for use in a bow drill set, both spindle and motherboard as well as for a hand drill (it needs to be quite dry to use as a hand drill). In fact, my first bow drill set used a PawPaw spindle. PawPaw is one of the softer woods, considered good for a beginner who is new to ancestral fire making.

### Human Uses: Medicine

In truth, there is almost nothing that I can find on the medicinal or magical uses of PawPaw. However, what does yield fruit is looking at some of the publications coming out of the scientific community. Even if PawPaw wasn't used traditionally, scientists are now discovering some of the amazing properties of this plant. For example, Nam et. al (2018) found that PawPaw fruit contained at least some anti-cancer components and may be a useful anti-cancer treatment with future study. In another study by Nam et. al. (2019), they found that alcohol extraction of unripe fruits contained considerable anti-oxidant and anti-microbial properties, suggesting possibilities for anti-aging and anti-microbial applications. PawPaw is also being explored as a possible food additive for domestic fowl production (Brannan et. al., 2018).

### Recipe: PawPaw Rice Pudding

This delightful recipe is fit for a ritual feast and is one of my favorites to make with PawPaw.

- 2 cups cooked rice
- 1 cup PawPaw (peeled, seeded, and mashed)
- 1 cup milk or sweetened Almond milk
- 1/2 teaspoon fresh Lemon or Lime zest
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

Cook rice according to the instructions on the package. When the rice is 75% cooked and has most of the water absorbed, stir the PawPaw, milk, salt, and zest. Cook in a pot for another 15-20 minutes until the rest of the liquid is absorbed. Stir regularly to prevent scorching. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla. Cool and serve. It goes well with a topping of Almond, Coconut, dark chocolate, and whipped cream.

### Magic: PawPaw Seed Cleansing Ritual

PawPaw seeds are potent magical tools that can be used for any number of ritual activities. In this ritual, use a PawPaw seed to cast off a toxic situation to help you move past it or to cast off anything else that does not serve you. You can use a PawPaw seed, and if you do not have access to a seed, a branch or a leaf from a PawPaw tree will work.



Visit a wild place and take your PawPaw seed with you. Find a quiet place to sit with your seed. Open a sacred grove and state your intentions for toxicity removal. Place the seed on your heart, speaking about the situation and the need for toxicity removal. Breathe deeply and imagine the toxicity from the situation that has clung to you moving into the seed. Repeat this step with your mind, your feet, your hands, and any other places on your body that is carrying the toxicity. When you are finished, unearth the soil near you and plant the seed. Speak aloud, offering this energy back to the earth where it will be transformed and healed. Offer gratitude to the PawPaw and the earth, then close your grove. Firmly leave the area, not looking back, the toxicity behind you.



## Sassafras

In the fall months, you might be lucky enough to see a Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) in her fall splendor. She will be decked head to toe in yellow, orange, red, purple, and magenta; an old Sassafras tree in full fall foliage is certainly a sight to behold. With her wavy trunk and twisted branches, Sassafras makes no apologies about her ability to stand out from the crowd. Her four variable leaf patterns (mittens (right or left), single leaves, double mittens) help show her flexibility and charm. While Sassafras is not present in the traditional Ogham or other Western magical traditions as she is distinctly an *American* magical tree, she is a powerful tree with much to offer us.

### Sassafras Magic

- **Good Life.** Sassafras helps us live the best life we can, in good health, prosperity, and peace. Sassafras has broad healing powers, particularly associated with longevity and having overall good health and a good life. Use this in workings where you are focusing on those aspects: having a peaceful home, having prosperity in your life, cultivating joy, and having success.
- **Whimsy.** Sassafras has a joyful presence in the forest, with sweet-smelling roots, sweet-smelling leaves, and a colorful display in the fall. Sassafras presents a whimsical view of the world—mismatched leaves, a colors-of-the-rainbow fall display, odd and twisted branching habits, growing in curves rather than straight lines, and the sweet fragrance of both the roots and leaves. This tree offers a kind of joy and innocence that can help us also come to this delightful place. This is particularly good for healing magic and self-work where you are working to cultivate a sense of wonder, innocence, and curiosity about the world.
- **Wealth.** Sassafras has long been used in the folk traditions for wealth. But we can consider wealth as more than just financial stability, but rather, an abundance of resources, food, and other needs. We can be wealthy in many ways, including financially, and Sassafras speaks to that. Use Sassafras for workings that are helping you bring abundance and wealth into your life, including for new jobs, cultivating abundant harvests in your garden, and starting a new business.

### Sassafras Divination

- **Good Life.** When you draw Sassafras in a reading, it indicates that you are able to live your best life and that you have good times before you. This is the card of joy, of happiness, and most of all, of contentment. Enjoy the good fortune and contentment while it lasts—but Sassafras suggests that this may have some staying power for some time.
- **Whimsy.** Sassafras also encourages us to draw upon an inner sense of playfulness, quaintness, or fanciful behavior. When you see Sassafras in a reading, it is a good time to go frolic in forests, find your inner child, and simply enjoy the moment.
- **Wealth.** Wealth comes in many forms, and when you draw Sassafras in a reading, this may be a sign that matters of wealth are at play. This may include your finances and financial stability, other physical things that sustain you: clothing, food, family, and more. Sassafras in



a reading indicates that you may need to take a closer issue at wealth in the present situation or that wealth may be coming into your life.



## Ecology

Sassafras has been called by many names and these names help teach us some of her power: AUGE Tree, Saxifrax, Cinnamon Wood, Cinnamonwood, Saloop, Smelling Stick, Chewing Stick, Tea Tree, Winauk (Native Americans in Delaware and Virginia); Pauane (Timuca Indians); Kombu (Choctaw); and Weyanoke (Algonquin). Sassafras is a member of the Laurel family and can be found all across the Southeastern United States and up to New England, into the Great Lakes and Ontario.

Sassafras is typically a fairly small tree, growing 20-40 feet in height with a trunk 1-2 feet in diameter in the northern end of her range. In southern portions of its range, she can grow much larger, up to 100 feet high. She predominantly grows on the edges of forests, in openings of Oak mesic forests, or along fence rows.

Sassafras grows in a whimsical fashion, her branches coming out at random angles and offering interesting twists and curves. This is an easy way to

tell a Sassafras from other trees. The other key identifying feature is her leaf structure. Sassafras has three different leaves, usually appearing on the same branch. She has a standard leaf (no ridges) that is smooth and soft to the touch. She also has a leaf looking like a mitten, with either a left or right thumb. Finally, she has a leaf that has a thumb on both sides. When you pick a leaf and rub it between your fingers or tear it, you also get a distinct impression of Fruit Loops Cereal—a sweet smelling and very pleasant sensation.

Sassafras reproduces through cloning through her lateral root system. If you've ever met a mother Sassafras in the forest, you will likely have seen her many babies surrounding her on the forest floor. The mother tree, usually much larger, sends off rootlets that pop up new baby trees. The babies live by the nutrients of the mother tree and hope that the forest will open up enough to give them life and light to reach into the canopy. Young Sassafras trees have green





bark, and as they age, by 7-10 years old, they will grow the characteristic darker bark, with the bark ridges getting thicker as they age.

Sassafras provides habitat and food to the Spicebush Swallowtail Butterfly and the Promethea Moth along with other moths and insects. While Sassafras does produce small purple fruits (high in fat), the fruits are sparse on the tree. They are fed on by various birds including wild turkeys, Woodpeckers, Catbirds, and Northern Bobwhites. In winter and spring, White-tailed Deer can enjoy the foliage and branches and rabbits may eat the bark, particularly in lean winter months.

## Sassafras in American History

Sassafras has played an unfortunate role in the Western colonization of North America by the Europeans. Sassafras was the first “discovery” and export from North America back to the Old World, at a time when wood and wooden objects were central to everyday life. In *A Sampler of Wayside Herbs*, Barbara Pond suggests that it was the hunt for Sassafras that actually inspired early Colonial exploration; for example, in 1602, Gosnold was very excited to discover Sassafras growing on Martha’s Vineyard Island. In the 1600s, massive amounts of ships called “Sassafras carriers” brought Sassafras wood and roots to the Old World. In 1570, Thomas Hariot included in his report from Virginia, as described by Erichsen-Brown, “Sassafras, called by the inhabitants Winauk, a kind of wood most pleasant and sweete smel, and of most rare vertues in physic for the cure of many diseases.” Eric Sloane in *In Reverence of Wood* writes about it as the “American Wonder Drug,” and it grew in popularity such that it became known to cure any ailment or disease and as a general health tonic to keep one prime and to allow one to live a longer life. Even as early as 1577, a book by Dr. Monardes, a Spanish Physician, was translated into English titled, *The Joyful News from the West Indies* and it described the medicinal uses of Sassafras, which helped continue its prevalence of an import from the New World. In 1600, from a book by John Brereton, he reports Sassafras selling for at least 3 shillings a pound; 1 ton was sold for 336 British pounds (which was quite a lot of money in those days).

Because early Sassafras ships made it back to England without harm, Sassafras also quickly developed a reputation for being a “lucky wood” and a “protective wood”; Eric Sloane writes about how people soon were making many things of Sassafras, such as spoons, cradle inlays, and bible boxes (to keep away evil spirits). Sassafras wood was included in new ship designs to keep away evil spirits and prevent the ship from being wrecked. Further, for over a century, it was believed to extend life, cure all diseases, and drive away any sickness. And so, from the time of early Western exploration in the New World, Sassafras was a highly regarded and sought commodity that offered healing and protection. By the 1850s, the 200-year Sassafras craze seemed to have died down, which is for the best of the Sassafras populations here in North America.

What we have to recognize in this history is how Sassafras—and the peoples who lived in lands that grew Sassafras—were exploited. Sassafras has been associated with wealth and luck because of this colonialist legacy. While I think these associations are important for North American magical traditions, part of the reason I suggest wealth more broadly is to recognize and honor the natural abundance that we can receive in nature—when we are in balance with her.



## Human Uses: Wood and Food

Sassafras was widely used and honored by many peoples and continues to hold a place of reverence and respect in many communities today. Sassafras wood is medium to light brown, and while strong, has a thick grain and an uneven texture. It is durable and is easy to work, making it useful for small crafts, wood working, and furniture. It does not grow big enough to be used commercially, thankfully, but is well loved and used within the woodworking community.

Sassafras root has been used as a nature plant dye. Typically, you get either a pink or a warm brown, depending on quantity. The Pennsylvania Dutch used it often to dye linen or hemp.

The root wood can also produce lasting orange dye for fibers (using urine as a mordant), creating beverages from the roots and leaves.

People have used the distinct sweet-spiciness of Sassafras to flavor a variety of beverages, foods, and even soaps. Today, you can purchase commercial preparations of Sassafras and Sassafras essential oil with the safrole removed. I offer two recipes employing Sassafras root (both traditional to Northern Appalachia) below.

Sassafras wood has traditionally been used to make boxes and chests for protection against bugs and moths (similar to Cedar). Traditionally, people even built henhouses out of it to keep insects out of the henhouse. I've made my chickens' perches out of Sassafras and Cedar with great results in this regard. You can also use a bag of Sassafras wood chips near your clothes to repel moths.

Sassafras leaves (dried and powdered) are a wonderful thickener for soups and stews. To harvest them, you can get them anytime they are mature throughout the summer. Remove the stems and veins from the leaves, and then powder them up in a mortar or pestle. You could also use a food processor, but I'd take it outside as it can produce a fine dust that you don't want to breathe in in your house. In Cajun cooking, file gumbo is a Sassafras gumbo that is thickened the leaf powder. The Sassafras leaf offers a great flavor that is a bit sweet.

You can also enjoy Sassafras leaves fresh. The young leaves as they emerge in spring are best and can be used in a nice salad or garnish. Even older, the leaves are still tasty to nibble on and have a refreshing and sweet flavor. Even in the winter and early spring, you can nibble on the winter buds (but only a few with permission or you will harm the tree)

## Human Uses: Herbalism, Safrole and Safety

Sassafras has a long history of use in traditional Native and Western medicine, but today, safrole, which is concentrated in the roots is considered “possibly carcinogenic” by the US Food and Drug Administration. Safrole is the primary aromatic ingredient in Sassafras root bark; it was declared as a weak carcinogen on the liver by the FDA in 1976 and is still listed as such. Safrole is, notably, also present in Camphor, Nutmeg, and Mace. Like other herbal medicines, studies about chemical constituents in plants are often conducted at hundreds of times the typical dose and are never replicated. When I studied with Michigan Folk herbalist Jim McDonald, he noted that Nutmeg contains almost as much safrole as Sassafras and yet it wasn't banned by the FDA. He also noted that the studies took Sassafras essential oil and injected it into rats—and no further research has ever been done on the effects of safrole in normal circumstances. Matthew Wood



in his *New World Herbal* notes, “Safrole is a neurotoxin and carcinogenic in isolation, but tests have shown that people who drink the tea for years actually have a reduced rate of cancer. Still, the unadulterated Sassafras root and root bark remain suspect” (315). Further, in the *Peterson Guide*, it is noted that there are more carcinogenic substances in a can of beer than a can of traditional root beer with Sassafras as the main ingredient. Given the complexity of the safrole issue, I would suggest that you read for yourself and make up your own mind about whether or not you want to consume tea.

Sassafras was taken internally for a variety of healing purposes throughout the ages, with extensive use by Indigenous peoples. Traditional herbalism recognizes Sassafras as a spring tonic, blood purifying, and blood thinning herb and was used in both the spring and fall for this purpose. In 1830, Constantine Rafinesque wrote, “The Indians use a strong decoction to purge and cleanse the body in the spring” (Quoted in Wood, *New World Herbs*, 315). Wood notes that it helps thin the blood, improves circulation to the body’s periphery and brain, and aids with arthritis. Euell Gibbons in *Hunting the Wild Asparagus* notes that traditionally, Sassafras root tea was made with Maple sap water for spring tonic. He noted that even in the 1950s, when he wrote his book, that many folks still drink Sassafras tea “as a spring tonic, believing that it thins the blood and prepares the body to better stand the coming heat of summer.” Here in rural Appalachia, many people (including my own family) drink Sassafras tea regularly, just as our ancestors drank Sassafras tea in their spring tonics and root beers.

Today, traditional Western herbalists recognize Sassafras root as a warming, spicy, and aromatic herb that functions as an alterative (tonic) for the liver with mild antiseptic qualities. It has a specific action on the blood and circulatory system, stimulating blood flow and enhancing periphery circulation. It is also used to prevent heart attacks from thick, coagulated blood. Jim McDonald notes that it has a specific action on the blood and circulatory system, stimulating blood flow and enhancing periphery circulation. It can address circulatory congestion issues (such as cold fingers and toes, varicose veins, or pelvic circulatory issues). Matthew Wood notes that could also be used to help increase circulation during a fever (along with Boneset and Elderflower). It can function as an aphrodisiac if poor pelvic circulation is causing the reduction of the libido. This is typically taken in tea form. Because the aromatic qualities are the medicinal ones, Jim McDonald recommends a shorter boil (3-5 minutes) and then let the roots sit for a long time (overnight if possible) before consuming it.

Matthew Wood also notes a number of other Native American uses. One such use was a fever remedy; they used the heartwood of Sycamore, Wild Cherry bark, Mountain Mint, and Sassafras as fever remedies. Sassafras root bark was also a Native American bruise remedy; they made an oil or powered the bark and added Mullein for bruises, swollen faces, etc. Native Americans also used the leaves to treat wounds by rubbing fresh leaves on an open wound.

Sassafras leaf is cooling and demulcent and is traditionally used as a demulcent for coating and soothing scratchy and dry throats. To do this, prepare boiling water and pour over dried leaves; let sit till it is cool and strain. Wood notes that, “The root bark is picked in the spring to thin the blood, the mucilage in the fall [leaves] to thicken it.”



## Harvesting Sassafras

Understanding Sassafras' growth habit and reproduction through lateral roots is a great way to get copious amounts of root without damaging the tree. Sassafras seedlings can't survive long in full shade, so they either need an edge or a forest disturbance (like a tree falling and making a clearing). You can harvest some of the roots between a seedling tree and a mother easily. The other easy way to harvest Sassafras roots is to wait for a storm to drop one—then you can simply saw them off and harvest all the roots. The inner root bark is the most aromatic and medicinal, so even very large roots from a mother tree that has fallen would work very well. The roots of small Sassafras trees can be used as is; the larger roots from a fallen tree have to have the tough, outer root bark peeled and removed prior to use.

## Sassafras in the Western Magical and Folk Traditions

Because Sassafras is a new-world plant, the Western Magical tradition has very little to offer. One exception to this is Hoodoo, which is a distinctly American magical tradition. In this tradition, Sassafras has a very specific use as being tied to wealth and money. Cat Yronwode in *Hoodoo Herb and Root Magic* suggests that Sassafras can be used to bringing in wealth, good fortune, and overall success in business. She notes that people have used it to make money mojos (for holding onto money) to sidewalk scrubs and carpet sprinkles to bring money into a business. I strongly suspect that this use of Sassafras is directly related to the relationship that Sassafras had to colonization, exporting, and its status as a highly sought commercial commodity in the 1600s and beyond. Thus, we should be mindful in working with wealth magic and Sassafras.

However, if we delve into other kinds of folk magic practices, also tied to the commercialization and belief that Sassafras could cure any ill, we see Sassafras having several different roles, again, mostly concerning its “curative” properties. In *Travels into North America*, from 1772, P. Kalm writes, “Swedes wash and scour the containers in which they intend to keep cider, beer or brandy with water in which Sassafras root or its peel has been boiled; which they think renders all those liquors more wholesome.” Further, coming out of my own family heritage, the Pennsylvania Dutch added Sassafras root to their Apple butter or Applesauce to enhance flavor; they also added pieces of Sassafras root to dried fruit to keep out worms and add flavor—and possibly for other reasons dealing with protection and cleansing.

## Recipe: Magical Sassafras Spring Tonic

There are lots of approaches to the traditional Sassafras root tonic, and many of the families here in the Appalachian Mountains have their own recipes. The most traditional way to produce a spring tonic with Sassafras is to tap a Maple tree and use the fresh Maple water to brew a strong tea. I realize a lot of people may not have this option, and thus, using any water source is fine. A typical preparation is 3 cups water to 3 tablespoons of chopped Sassafras root (dried; for fresh root you only need 1 teaspoon per cup). Boiled the root for 5 minutes with a lid on, and then left to stand for at least 30 minutes.





If you want, you can add a with a tablespoon of Honey and a tablespoon of Apple cider vinegar (or fire cider) for an even more medicinal effect. I suggest drinking this tea as part of your early spring ceremonies when you are doing other cleansing and purification work.

### Recipe: Traditional Root Beer

The most traditional root beer here in the US uses Sassafras as a primary ingredient along with Black Birch branches (or Wintergreen). Traditional Root Beer was not just used as a fine drink, but as a tonic—it was medicinal as well as enjoyable. Here's a simple recipe I've used to make a great root beer<sup>9</sup>.

For this root beer, you make a simple syrup and then add plain seltzer/carbonated water to your syrup (to taste). Simple syrup is made of equal parts of water and sugar (or another sweetener of your choice, like Honey or Maple syrup).

1. In a saucepan, combine 2 cups water and 2 cups sugar (raw or regular is fine).
2. Add 1/2 cup Sassafras roots and handful of Black Birch branches (approximately 1/2 cup). For variations, you can also add Juniper berries (1 tablespoon) and Star Anise here as well (1 tablespoon each).
3. Simmer the mixture, stirring often, for 20 minutes with the lid on. Be wary of boiling off too much water (and you can always add back a few tablespoons if necessary).
4. Strain your mixture and pour into a mason jar. Let cool and store in the fridge (it will keep up to a month; you can also can it and/or freeze it).
5. When you want to drink it, add about 2 tablespoons to seltzer water (to taste) and enjoy.

### Magic: Sassafras Leaf Divination

Sassafras can offer you a simple “Yes/No/Unsure” divination with the three leaves. Find three Sassafras leaves – one of each kind: two thumbs up (yes), one thumb up (unsure), and no thumbs up (No). Simply ask your question and toss the leaves into the air. The one that lands closest to you is the answer.

### Magic: Sassafras Good Health Root Charm

With permission and gratitude, harvest a bit of a Sassafras root. Sand it and clean it as you would like, and then carry it with you to encourage good health and a long and happy life.

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<sup>9</sup> I will note that this is a simple syrup version—there is also a more elaborate fermented version. For that, I refer readers to Stephen Harrod Buhner’s amazing book *Sacred and Healing Beers: The Secrets of Ancient Fermentation* (1998, Brewers Publications).