



The State Arboretum of Virginia Names Sassafras the 2020 Tree of the Year

On Arbor Day, April 24, the State Arboretum celebrates the sassafras tree for its fast growth, striking colors, and sweet, root beer-like fragrance

Boyce, VA – No time is more fitting than Arbor Day, April 24, for the State Arboretum of Virginia at Blandy Experimental Farm to announce its second Tree of the Year: the sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*). The Arboretum’s 2020 Tree of the Year was selected after deliberation by Curator T’ai Roulston, Blandy arborists, and Virginia Department of Forestry representatives.

According to Curator Roulston, sassafras is a tree perfectly suited to many landscapes because it’s a fast-growing tree native to the eastern U.S., grows to a height of 30 to 60 feet, and is available at many area nurseries. “It makes a very nice tree for the yard if the secondary sprouts from the base are removed to encourage a single tall tree rather than a sassafras thicket,” Roulston notes.

Other appealing features of the sassafras include striking blue-black fruits on bright red stalks that birds eat in autumn, “but these fruits are only produced by female sassafras trees, if they’re pollinated,” Roulston points out. The sassafras leaves also are well known and loved for their shapes. Individual trees produce three different leaf types: mitten shaped, three-fingered, and oval. The leaves also put on a nice show of color in the fall, ranging from yellow to orange to red. Various parts of the plant, including the leaves, give off a very pleasant root beer-like fragrance; traditionally these were used in the making of various medicinal beverages. Roulston warns, however, that because one of sassafras’ chemical compounds – safrole – has been found to be carcinogenic, only sassafras flavoring with safrole removed is available commercially now. The sassafras grows in hardiness zones 4-9.

On Arbor Day each year, the State Arboretum of Virginia honors one extraordinary species of tree as its Tree of the Year. The goal of the program is five-fold:

- To remind us of the value and environmental significance of trees in Virginia and beyond
- To educate the public about the variety of trees in Virginia
- To nurture a love of trees in all ages
- To promote important tree education, science, and conservation at the State Arboretum and elsewhere in Virginia
- To join with others in awe of the majesty of Virginia’s trees

“We want everyone – of all ages – to know how important trees are to us environmentally,” says Roulston. “Every day at the Arboretum we practice and promote tree education, science, and conservation through research and public programming. That’s a vital part of our mission.”

In selecting the Tree of the Year, these key traits are considered:

- Does the tree have a compelling story or uniqueness? Does it have special characteristics – for example, color or leaf structure – that make the tree an interesting choice?
- Is the tree readily available for purchase in Virginia at most nurseries?
- Is the tree familiar to most gardeners?
- Is the tree easy to grow and nurture for nonprofessionals and will make a good addition to a residential landscape?

The State Arboretum of Virginia's 2019 Tree of the Year was the eastern redbud.

About the State Arboretum of Virginia:

The State Arboretum of Virginia is home to more than 5,000 woody trees and shrubs, including a unique 300-tree ginkgo grove and a 36-tree Cedar of Lebanon alley. The Arboretum staff and many volunteers across the state help to thoughtfully grow the collection each year by planting new and replacement trees.

The Arboretum is part of historic Blandy Experimental Farm, a research field station for the University of Virginia's Department of Environmental Sciences. Blandy Experimental Farm is on Route 50 in Clarke County, about 10 miles east of Winchester and 20 miles west of Middleburg. Directions and a calendar of events are online at

<http://www.blandy.virginia.edu>.

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