

# UNUSUAL NATIVE TREES



Mary E Harrison

#### ABSTRACT

In the central hardwoods region of the US, several small trees have potential for landscaping as either understory plants or in full sun where their fall color, wide adaptability, and apparent resistance to pests make them attractive. I outline 6 species of deciduous trees, representing the genus *Sassafras*, *Oxydendron*, *Nyssa*, *Cladrastis*, *Cephalanthus*, and *Viburnum*, that I find particularly interesting and deserving of more widespread use.

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#### KEY WORDS

landscaping, deciduous, seeds, bareroot, propagation

#### NOMENCLATURE

USDA NRCS (2006)

Top row: Blackhaw viburnum (*Viburnum prunifolium*), buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*); Middle row: Sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboreum*), blackgum (*Nyssa sylvatica*); Bottom row: Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), yellowwood (*Cladrastis kentukea*).

All photos by Joseph G. Strauch Jr except for lower left by Gregory A. Hoss

Many lovely, deciduous trees native to the central hardwood zone of the US are available and worthy of greater use in landscape plantings. I have 6 favorites that are all flowering trees, some showier than others. At least three of them turn brilliant orange and (or) scarlet in the fall, coloring the landscape. These species are also smaller or slower growing and will tolerate sun or shade—from open landscapes to woodlands.

#### SASSAFRAS

One of the easiest to grow is *Sassafras albidum* (Nutt.) Nees [Lauraceae]. Sassafras is found throughout eastern and central North America, from southwestern Ontario to eastern Texas and southern Florida. It has an average height of 4.5 to 6.0 m (15 to 20 ft). Its branches, foliage, and fruit are fragrant when crushed. Fall colors are brilliant shades of orange and red. The roots were, and still are, used to make tea. In times past the tea was considered a spring tonic. Oil of sassafras comes from the bark of the roots and is used for flavoring in candies. The foliage can be fascinating to children, as 4 distinct types of leaves can occur on a single branch (Figure 1).

Sassafras can spread into a grove by suckering roots. It is dioecious; male and female flowers in greenish yellow clusters occur on different trees in late April. The fruit is a bluish-black berry, eaten by birds who spread the seeds around. These trees prefer slightly acid soils that are well drained. Mine are growing between very tall spruces (*Picea* L. [Pinaceae]), the needles of which create the acidity. I propagate sassafras by transplanting root suckers: cut the root to the sucker with a shovel when the sucker has reached a height of about 60 cm (2 ft). The following spring, dig up the suckers and transplant them into nursery rows.

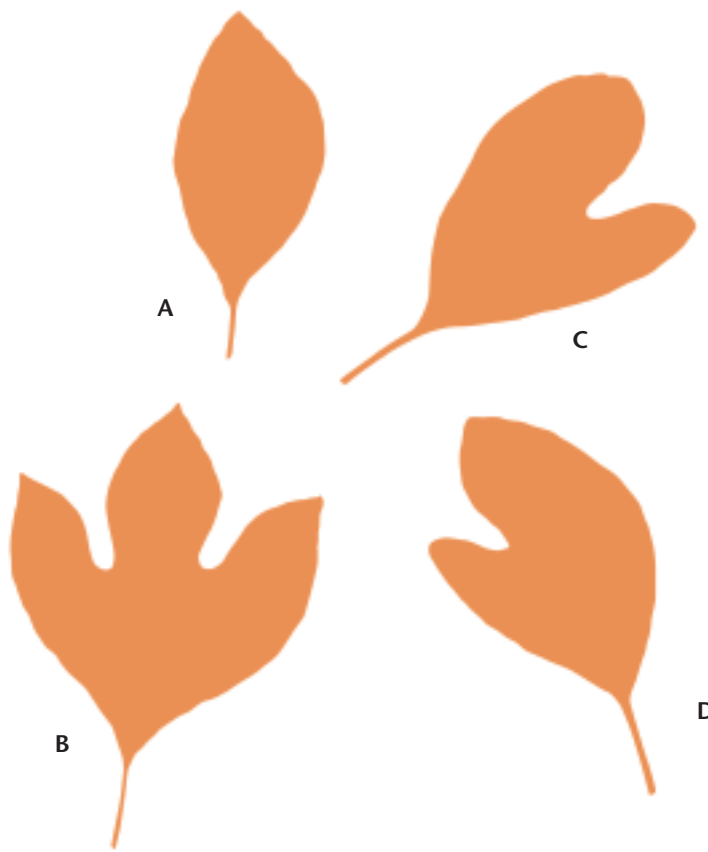


Figure 1. Sassafras leaves can be a smooth oval 10+ cm (4+ in) long and up to 7.5 cm (3 in) wide (A), or wider with 3 extended lobes (B), or most interesting to children, solid leaves having a left or right lobe or thumb and called either a left (C) or right (D) mitten. Illustration by Amy Redicker

## YELLOWWOOD

The fall color of *Cladrastis lutea* (Michx.f.) K. Koch (Fabaceae), also known as yellowwood, is native to the eastern half of the US and southern Canada. It is not as brilliant as the above-mentioned trees. Although some references state that trees have orange fall color, my trees are a solid yellow. The fragrant flowers are the asset. In June the flowers hang in long racemes of creamy white, with white stamens protruding from each individual flower. Leaves are compound, a nice soft shade of green, not bothered by insects or disease, and they simply “disappear” in fall without having to be raked. Yellowwood grows in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 to 8 to an average height of 9 m (30 ft). My trees must tolerate wet soils from snow melt and spring rains, yet they have never been watered during droughts that have harmed other trees in the area. Although I have read that the limbs break easily in storms, I have never had to pick up broken branches after storms in the way I must from maples (*Acer* L. [Aceraceae]) and ashes (*Fraxinus* L. [Oleaceae]). It grows well for us in any soil and is easy to transplant. We grow a pink flowering hybrid, ‘Perkins Pink,’ that is quite lovely.

## SOURWOOD

Another native tree that turns a gorgeous fall color is *Oxydendrum arboreum* L. DC. (Ericaceae), also known as sourwood or sorrel tree. A creamy white, bell-type bloom that looks like a spray of lily-of-the-valley, gives it another common name of lily-of-the-valley tree. It is found from New York west to Illinois and throughout the southeastern US. The blooms on this lovely native are much showier than other species. It blooms from late July into August, and the flowers contain nectar that bees use to make honey. This slow-growing species reaches an average height of 7.5 m (25 ft). Its leaves are ovate shape with slight toothed margins, lustrous green, and have an acid taste, hence the name sourwood. Leaves turn brilliant scarlet in the fall. I have a difficult time transplanting this tree as bareroot; it transplants much better when it is balled and burlapped. This tree does well in the average landscape.

## BLACKGUM

*Nyssa sylvatica* Marsh. (Cornaceae), also called blackgum or tupelo, starts turning scarlet in early fall and holds its color a very long time. Blackgum is found from southern Ontario to eastern Oklahoma and Texas to southern Florida. Its leaves are a glossy deep green oval, 5 to 10 cm (2 to 4 in) long. In its native habitat of USDA Hardiness Zones 5 to 8, it is usually found in wet environments, but for me it does very well in average landscape, never requiring water. It does like acid soil, so a bit of acid fertilizer once a year is beneficial. Its wood is hard to work with and warps easily, so it is used mostly for pallets, crates, or pulpwood. It is another tree that is hard to transplant bareroot, but it transplants well as balled and burlapped. The fruits are drupes, hanging in groups of two or three on a long stem. Each drupe contains a single seed. It can be started from seeds fairly readily.

## BUTTONBUSH

Another native plant that is typically seen as a shrub but can be grown as a lovely, blooming understory tree is common buttonbush, *Cephalanthus occidentalis* L. (Rubiaceae). Buttonbush is found from New Brunswick south to Florida and west to Minnesota, Kansas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. It also occurs in Cuba, Mexico, and Central America. The 2.5-cm (1-in) balls of white flowers hang from a 5-cm (2-in) stem, with white stamens sticking out all over the ball. Bloom can be profuse, with 2 or 3 balls on the end of most branches. My original shrub is now trimmed to a clump of 3 trunks and stands 3.5 m (12 ft) tall so I can stand

beneath it or sit nearby and enjoy the flowers. The flower balls turn green and remain on the tree until late winter when freezing causes them to fall apart. At that time, I gather seeds to sow for the next crop. The simple oval leaves are 7.5 to 10 cm (3 to 4 in) long and about 5 cm (2 in) wide and at my location have never had a disease or insect bother them. The first time I saw a buttonbush, it was growing in 60 cm (2 ft) of water at the edge of a lake and was in full enchanting bloom. Not having a body of water, I planted my first buttonbush where water from melting snow or summer storms would accumulate, draining away slowly. After 4 y we had a prolonged drought, and I lost many trees that I could not water, but my *Cephalanthus* survived without extra water even though I have read this would not be the case. They are growing well in my nursery, and I never give them extra water. *Cephalanthus* starts very easily from seeds. If you want to

grow them as shrubs, I find that dead-heading seedlings when they are about 60 cm (2 ft) in height forces them to branch out better.

### BLACKHAW VIBURNUM

The native *Viburnum prunifolium* L. (Caprifoliaceae), or blackhaw viburnum, is found from southern Ontario south throughout the eastern US to Georgia and eastern Texas. It forms an airy branched tree reaching a height of 4.5 to 6.0 m (15 to 20 ft). The spreading branches have many smaller twigs that carry the terminal clusters of white spring flowers, which are followed by bluish-black, edible fruit. Sweet, the fruits were often used for jams and jellies if the birds did not eat them first. In Ohio, viburnums can be propagated easily by cuttings in August. I take cuttings that are 12 to 15 cm (5 to 6 in) long, remove the lower leaves, and stick

the cuttings in moist sand, either under mist or in a discarded fish aquarium covered with glass. Either way, they root rather rapidly and are transferred to pots. Pots are then placed inside a cold frame until they can be planted in my nursery beds. Sowing seeds (berries) in September is another way to propagate this species (see below).

### STARTING FROM SEEDS

I sow seeds in a 10 cm (4 in) deep wooden flat containing a commercial “seed starter” soil mix. The flat is covered with a piece of hardware cloth, to prevent varmints from disturbing the seeds, and is placed into a cold frame for the winter. Some seeds germinate the following spring; some take another year or two. I keep the flats around for a couple of seasons to recover as many plants as possible. The Native Plant Network (URL: <http://www.nativeplantnetwork.org>) has 3 protocols for sassafras,



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1 for blackgum, 3 for buttonbush, and 11 for viburnum, but none specifically for *V. prunifolium*.

### SUMMARY

These 6 species have great potential as woodland understory plants for landscaping or even for planting in full sun. They have good fall color, grow well under a variety of environmental conditions, and are relatively easy to propagate. Consider using these smaller flowering native trees in your landscape.

### REFERENCE

[USDA NRCS] Natural Resources Conservation Service. 2006. The PLANTS database, version 3.5. URL: <http://plants.usda.gov> (accessed 29 Aug 2006). Baton Rouge (LA): National Plant Data Center.

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