

THE SASSAFRAS TEA PROJECT

As a young lad, I sometimes headed for Candler Mountain with friends to roam about to see what we could see. The base of the small mountain was about 45 minutes from my front door so we could reach our destination in a relatively short time without burning a lot of energy. The trees were dense on the mountain and there was a lot of wildlife—deer, chipmunks, groundhogs, squirrels, rabbits, snakes, birds of many species, lots of insects and an occasional bear. We always enjoyed our visits.

It was on a May afternoon after we had attended the Saturday morning cowboy movie, when four of us were sitting around on my front stoop talking about what we would do with rest of the day. One of my friends asked if any of us had ever drunk Sassafras Tea. I hadn't, nor had any of the other boys. "Well", said the questioner, "let's make some." Continuing, he said his father told him that there were Sassafras trees on Candler Mountain, and that once we located one we should chop off a few roots, bring them home, clean and boil the roots in water until we had tea. But how would we recognize a Sassafras tree? The boy's father had provided instructions: look for a tree 30 to 60 feet tall with yellow flowers. With no further discussion we decided that Sassafras Tea would be our project for the day.

What none of us knew at that point in our young lives is that Root Beer was made from Sassafras tree oil, and we all liked Root Beer. Years later, in the 1960s, Sassafras tree oil was banned from Root Beer because of the potential for liver damage if large amounts of the beverage were consumed. Native Americans used Sassafras oil for medicinal purposes and to ward off evil spirits, and in the 1600s Sassafras lumber was the second largest American export (after tobacco), much prized in England because of its beauty and durability.

Before we headed for the mountain, I went down in the basement and picked up a spade and sharpened the edge with a file. I also took along a sharpened hand axe to use in cutting the tree roots. We trudged about halfway up the mountain looking as we climbed to the left and right searching for a tall tree with yellow flowers. There were none. What we didn't know about the object of our search is that it grew in open areas where it would get plenty of sunshine. Eventually we stumbled into an open area that had been logged at some time in the past, and there along one edge were several Sassafras trees. Our depressed spirits immediately soared. We picked a tree with level ground beneath and began digging about five feet from the tree's base. Taking turns with the spade we soon had roots in sight, and using the hand axe cut away a half dozen small diameter roots. Then we refilled the hole and headed back down the mountain. "Yes," my mother said, "you may make Sassafras tea in my kitchen". She provided a brush to clean the roots and a pot in which to boil them. Then she set out four cups and saucers.

I put water in the pot and turned on the gas flame to bring the water to a boil. Meanwhile, the other boys were scrubbing the roots to clean away the dirt. When the water boiled, we dumped in the roots. We had no idea how long to boil them, but decided to continue until the water took on some color. What we didn't know was that the roots should have been dried for about a week before making tea. But that didn't seem to matter, and eventually we had a light orange colored tea ready to pour into our cups. It was delicious. But was it worth all the effort we had expended? Yes, of course. This was our project for the day, and we had successfully carried it out. We were highly pleased.

-- George Loving --