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GARDENING WITH THE MASTERS | JODI MORGAN

GARDENING WITH THE MASTERS: Native pollinator trees for the home landscape

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Morgan



Sassafras albidum

Special-North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox

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Loss of habitat is one of the many challenges facing pollinators. Restoring pollinator habitat in our yards by planting natives is an easy solution. Native trees, native bushes, and native flowers provide pollinator habitat. Native trees support many pollinators.

Fall is the perfect season to plant trees. The lower temperatures diminish the stress from transplantation. Fall temperatures are warm enough to allow the tree to extend its roots before the winter season. By spring, fall planted trees have a stronger root system to withstand the warmer temperatures. Many native trees are available for consideration. Most native trees provide benefit to pollinators and wildlife. We will concentrate on sassafras and American beech.

Sassafras grows in every county in Georgia. The Latin name for sassafras is *Sassafras albidum*. Sassafras has three species, only one species native to North America. Sassafras, in the wild, establishes itself in open fields, fence rows, and woodland edges. In cultivated areas, sassafras is a specimen tree. Sassafras requires little upkeep, doesn't need soil additives, and spreads readily.

Sassafras blooms in April, thus being one of the first nectar plants for pollinators. Birds, butterflies, and moths rely on sassafras as a host plant food and as nectar plant food. Sassafras hosts thirty-eight species of butterflies. The most well-known species being the Spicebush Swallowtail. The Spicebush Swallowtail caterpillar uses sassafras as a host plant. Several moth species also utilize sassafras as a host plant. Twenty-three species of birds rely on the sassafras berries for food. Sassafras is an important food source for pollinators.

Sassafras grows 20'-30' tall with a 25'-40' spread. The leaves are 3"-7" long. Sassafras leaves vary in shape from un-lobed to two-lobed. The leaves vary in fall color including yellow, fiery orange, to vibrant red. A sassafras tree is either male or female. Male flowers are lavish. Female flowers develop berries if pollinated. The flowers are yellow 2" long, and ½" in diameter.

Young sassafras trees have green bark. Older sassafras trees have stout and farrow reddish-brown bark. Rabbits will eat sassafras tree bark in the winter. Sassafras trees take 10 years to mature. They last 30 years; their root system stays in the top 12 inches of soil but does have a long tap root.

Sassafras trees are a versatile, low maintenance tree for your home landscape. They can be left to grow wild and dense or pruned as a specimen tree. Regardless of the growth decision, planting a sassafras tree provides food and habitat for a multitude of pollinators and wildlife.

American beech is another early blooming tree growing in the Eastern United States. The Latin name for American beech is *Fagus grandiflora*. Beech trees come in two species, one native to North America and the other to Europe. Untamed American beech spreads through suckers. Domesticated American beech is a show-case tree.

American beech, blooms in April-May time frame. Several forms of wildlife, bees, butterflies, moths, and other insects rely on American beech for food. Early Hairstreak, a rare eastern butterfly, relies on the American beech as a host plant. At least one-hundred species of butterflies and moths rely on American beech trees for food and habitat. Wood Thrush birds build nests in American beech trees. Beech nuts are a food source for several forms of wildlife.

American beech trees rise to 50'-80' in the air. Their canopy can reach 40'-60'. American beech leaves are an oblong oval shape with a serrated edge. The leaves turn a yellowish tan during the fall changing to light brown during the winter. American beech leaves stay on the tree through winter.

Both the male and female flowers appear on the same tree. The male flowers are a yellow globe shaped bloom. The female flowers occur in two to four clusters. The female flowers are a yellow green color.

The bark of an American beech is blue-grey and smooth. Older American beech tree bark is similar in appearance to elephant skin. The bark of American beech is thin and often scarred with animal marks from wildlife climbing the tree. American beech trees exhibit a similar root structure to the sassafras tree, shallow roots with a long tap root.

American beech trees are low-maintenance trees. They are a specimen tree in the home landscape. Beech nuts provide wildlife with food, the flowers support pollinators, and the early hairstreak use American beech as a host plant.

Trees are an anchor plant in the home landscape. Choosing low-maintenance trees that support wildlife and pollinators is an added plus for your yard.

Jodi Morgan is one of many UGA Master Gardener Extension Volunteers of Cherokee County. For more information or questions, contact the Cherokee County Extension Office at 770-721-7803 or for upcoming seminars follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/cherokeemastergardeners or cherokeemastergardeners.com.



— *Fagus grandiflora*

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