

THE FORGOTTEN TREES

Sassafras, Catalpa, and European Alder

by DOUGLAS J. CHAPMAN

Three low-maintenance trees, almost forgotten in the trade, which have exciting potential for use in the landscape include Sassafras, Catalpa, and European Alder. These plants have differential adaptations to many of our difficult landscape situations, while being resistant to most catastrophic insect or disease problems.

Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) is a native tree which is difficult to transplant but fills a unique place in the landscape. Its native range is from New England to Michigan

and south to Texas and Florida. Sassafras' mature habit is somewhat conical, reaching 30 to 50 feet in height and 20 to 35 feet in width when grown as a single stem. In a natural setting, it is often found as a plant that creeps over the landscape, spreading by root suckers. It has an interesting habit throughout the year. The foliage has three distinctly different leaves—with and without lobes and somewhat oval. The yellow-green summer foliage fades to a riot of color in the fall, ranging from scarlet-yellow to a deep maroon and purple. *Sassafras albidum* has a tap root, making it difficult to transplant but extremely drought resistant. This tree might propagate easily from softwood cuttings, thus leading to a new production technique. It is natively found growing in well-drained, sandy soils in the flood plain of a mature river. It requires well-drained soils, declining if clay is in the soil composition. It is somewhat sensitive to salt spray but has no real insect problems. When considering disease, there are few catastrophic problems. Foliar diseases are minimal but stem cankers can cause a problem. Normally stem cankers are an indication of stress, e.g. soil compaction or winter injury, but in the southern Appalachian region, *Nectria* Canker has poten-

tial to be a problem. In a native situation, Sassafras is often associated with redcedar, ash, oak, and hornbeam. It is a sun-labile plant, that is, it must be grown in full sun or decline will set in. When considering landscape use, it is particularly well adapted to parks, golf courses, and large area or commercial landscapes in a somewhat native—mass planting or as a single-stem specimen.

Catalpa (*Catalpa speciosa*), a tree often used during the early 1900's, is now difficult to find in the trade, almost forgotten. It has a somewhat oval, irregular habit at maturity, reaching 40 to 60 feet and 20 to 35 feet in width. The foliage is whorled, opposite, and very coarse textured. The leaf color is a dull yellow-green during the growing season with the leaves not developing color in the fall. Catalpa's bell-shaped white flowers (reminiscent of orchids) appear in late June. The fruit are 8- to 20-inch long pendulous green pods. Catalpa is native to Indiana and Tennessee but can readily be grown throughout the Northeast and Midwest. When considering soil adaptation, Catalpa adapts to almost any condition. It is often found in wet, poorly-drained soils, tolerating compaction well but will also do exceptionally well in droughty soils. It has a tap root and is a good companion plant in fine turf. Catalpa is somewhat resistant to salt and seems to thrive in most urban conditions. *Catalpa speciosa* is a tree that must be planted in full sun to thrive. It lends itself exceptionally well to home landscapes and park situations when a unique specimen is needed but is a problem as a street tree. When grown under the stress of street tree conditions, Verticillium Wilt is often a problem but, under ideal conditions of good vigor, this ring-poor tree often outgrows or overcomes early invasion of Verticillium Wilt. Catalpa is extremely resistant to breakage by ice storms and requires little pruning. Although it is somewhat coarse, almost grotesque in habit, *Catalpa speciosa* does have a place in the landscape.

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Sassafras exhibits scarlet-yellow fall color and has three distinctly different leaves. Transplanting is difficult due to a tap root.

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European Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) is an outstanding plant that adapts well to wet, heavy soil, has a rapid rate of growth, and, at maturity, has a somewhat oval habit, reaching 40 to 60 feet in height and 20 to 30 feet in width. European Alder foliage is a rich dark green during the growing season, but fall color is essentially nonexistent. The male flowers are pendulous catkins, 2 to 4 inches in length, which develop during early spring in central Michigan and earlier as one moves south to Northern Illinois and Ohio. The small, cone-like fruit remain on the tree throughout the winter, reminding one of a hemlock or other conifer. This plant has a lot of genetic variability. Several selections or cultivars should be considered. One particular selection of *Alnus glutinosa*, we have been interested in, develops red or maroon new growth which contrasts well against the dark green foliage. The soil conditions in which this plant thrives include heavy wet soil, although it does tolerate drought to some extent. Under normal conditions, it will grow 3 to 4 feet in height and rapidly can fill in as hedge or screen plantings. Disease problems are essentially nonexistent but two insects are worth considering. These include Leaf Miner and Wolly Alder Aphid. It should be stressed that these problems rarely require the application of pesticides. European Alder is outstanding as a hedge or in mass plantings for large area landscapes (replacing Lombardy Poplar).

When looking for unique trees which adapt well, why not consider European Alder for its tolerance of wet soils and its ability to grow as a dense screen or hedge; Catalpa as a tree which thrives in turf, is drought tolerant, and a unique specimen for home, park, or large-area landscapes; and Sassafras, the difficult to transplant native, which can provide a riot of color during the fall.

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