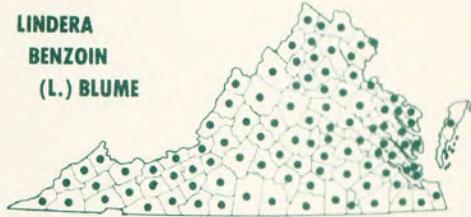


.... Where to See *Lindera benzoin*

Spicebush is widely distributed in the eastern United States, from New England south to Georgia and eastern Texas, and west to Michigan and Missouri spanning hardiness zones 4 through 9. Depending on elevation and the vagaries of spring's arrival, spicebush can usually be found in flower in Virginia sometime in the month of March. Berries ripen in September.



Map source - *Atlas of the Virginia Flora*, III (1992)

.... Conservation

Spicebush is a common plant with no particular threats to its continued existence in the wild. However, as with all native plants, the indiscriminate onslaught of habitat alteration and outright habitat destruction impacts the health and vigor of local populations. Also, the continued existence of the spicebush swallowtail butterfly depends on spicebush and close relatives such as sassafras and redbay (*Persea borbonia*), since its larvae eat no other plants.

Gardeners should not collect spicebush in the wild and should be certain that all native plants purchased are nursery-propagated, not wild-collected. To see and learn more about interesting species of plants native to Virginia, visit our website (www.vnps.org) and contact your local chapter of VNPS (details on website) about programs and wildflower walks in your area. For a retail list of nursery-propagated plants, see our website or send a SASE to: **Virginia Native Plant Society**, Blandy Experimental Farm, 400 Blandy Farm Lane, Unit 2, Boyce, VA 22620; (540-837-1600 or vnpsofc@shentel.net).

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Virginia Native Plant Society

Conserving Wild Flowers and Wild Places

Blandy Experimental Farm
400 Blandy Farm Lane, Unit 2
Boyce, VA 22620
www.vnps.org



Spicebush

Lindera benzoin

2006 Virginia Wildflower of the Year

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Lindera benzoin

Neither flashy nor rare, spicebush is a stalwart plant of wetlands with intricate minute flowers, enchanting fragrance, and modest horticultural potential. The yellow haze of spicebush flowers is a certain harbinger of spring.



Spicebush is a multi-stemmed deciduous shrub that grows to a height of 3 to 10 feet. Young stems are delicate and may be smooth or finely hairy. Leaves are alternate and simple, with an elliptic to obovate blade that tapers at both the base and apex and is bounded by a smooth margin. Examined closely, the margin will reveal a series of fine hairs that project directly out from the leaf edge. In size, leaves are neither remarkably large nor small; they range from 1 to 6 inches in length and up to about 2.5 inches wide, the widest point somewhat above the middle of the blade. Overall, leaves offer few distinctive features for easy visual recognition. However, as the common name implies, a pleasant fragrance emanating from crushed stems or leaves provides a reliable cue for identification of this common but easily overlooked plant.

Spicebush flowers in the early spring well before emergence of its leaves. The plants are usually dioecious, meaning staminate (male) and pistillate (female) flowers occur on separate individuals. Staminate and pistillate plants can be distinguished before flowering by the number of flower buds attached at the nodes of young twigs: the staminate buds are more numerous. In full bloom, the staminate and pistillate flowers are quite small, about 5 millimeters in length and diameter, yellow, and nearly sessile on the bare twigs. Flowers of both sexes are enclosed in a 6-membered perianth; distinguishing these similar perianth elements as either sepals or petals is problematic. Staminate flowers have 9 fertile stamens which, despite their small size, are intricately structured. As is characteristic of



the family Lauraceae, anther stalks bear a pair of glands and the anthers open by means of little flaps resembling trap-doors. Pistillate flowers have a single simple pistil (ovary, style, and stigma) and a variable number of sterile stamens called staminodia. Over the course of the growing season, the simple pistil will mature as a short-stalked fleshy red fruit about a half inch long with a single seed. Fruits mature by late summer or early autumn, not long before the leaves drop.

The genus name for spicebush commemorates Swedish botanist John Linder. "Benzoin" refers to an aromatic resin derived from an unrelated plant, a species of *Styrax* from southeast Asia. Nevertheless, spicebush was once classified in a genus called *Benzoin*, but this nomenclature is now considered archaic. *Lindera* is classified in the laurel family, or Lauraceae. As such, it is related to our local sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) and several exotics frequently encountered in supermarkets: the avocado (*Persea americana*) of Central America, bay leaf (*Laurus nobilis*) from the Mediterranean, and cinnamon (*Cinnamomum* spp.) from southeast Asia. Spicebush has two close relatives from the Atlantic and Gulf coastal plains: *Lindera melissifolia* and *Lindera subcoriacea*, both of which are plants of conservation concern.

Chemistry & Uses

As is typical of many members of Lauraceae, tissues of spicebush are permeated with terpenes and related fragrant compounds, sometimes called "essential oils." Bark, twigs, leaves, and berries have all been used to prepare flavorings or folk medicines based on these fragrant compounds. Ground fruits, fresh or dried, with or without the single seed, have been substituted for allspice. Fruit oils have been used as a liniment for sore muscles and joints. Otherwise,



most spicebush folk medicine employs teas to treat a wide variety of ailments. Despite traditional use and little or no evidence of toxicity, long-term and high-dosage effects of spicebush ingestion are unknown so caution would seem prudent.

Ecology

Spicebush is usually found in areas of moist soil, along streams, flood plains, and swamp forests, but it sometimes occurs on dry soil. It thus serves as a "facultative wetland" species in formal determinations of wetland habitat. In nature, it often forms dense thickets that provide excellent small mammal cover. Further, it is an important food plant for butterfly larvae, notably the spicebush swallowtail and the eastern tiger swallowtail. At maturity, the bright red fruits are enjoyed by various frugivorous birds.

Cultivation & Propagation

In the garden spicebush is a useful naturalistic planting at the edges of lakes or ponds or in other areas where excessive soil moisture limits plant choices. It thrives in full sun or part shade and aids in erosion control. When viewed from a distance, flowering plants provide a subtle haze of yellow further enhanced by a dark backdrop. Plantings should include both staminate and pistillate individuals. Staminate plants have showier flowers, but only pistillate plants produce bright glossy red drupes. The plants offer bright yellow foliage in the fall, especially if planted in full sun. Spicebush can be propagated by seed or softwood cuttings. Seeds must not be allowed to dry out. For best germination, freshly collected seeds should be stratified at 40 degrees F for at least four months before sowing. The plants are vigorous and suffer few diseases.