

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #99 answer: SPICEBUSH (*Lindera benzoin*)

The common name says it all: every part of spicebush is infused with a delightful aroma, reminiscent of citrus and allspice. The name *benzoin* likens the scent to a resin used for incense and perfume. Like others in the laurel family (such as cinnamon and camphor), this shrub has a high concentration of essential oils. In winter, scratch a twig and smell it. In summer, crush a leaf to release the scent. The berries too are aromatic. Recipes use all these parts, though the USDA has not approved it.

Find spicebush, often in clonal colonies, in the understory of open woods, usually on moist, acidic soil. Look for the white lenticels (small pores that allow air to enter stems) scattered on its smooth, chocolate brown twigs and branches.

In spring, this is one of the first plants to bloom. Emerging before the leaves, tiny yellow flowers, minus petals, cluster directly on the stem. Plants tend to bear flowers of only one sex. The fruits start as tiny green balls, which elongate into scarlet drupes, shining against bright yellow autumn leaves. Over 20 species of migrating birds eat the fruits, and they are a favorite food of wood thrushes.

Compounds in spicebush are being tested for anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and antibiotic properties. The same chemicals protect it from most herbivory. Raccoons, opossums, and deer do browse spicebush, but it is not their first choice. After heavy browsing, the next year's leaves respond by bearing even more chemicals.

The Spicebush swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*) prefers such browsed plants. The larvae can only survive by eating spicebush; adults feed on its nectar and lay eggs upon it. Overwintering caterpillars enfold themselves in leaves and attach them to a twig by thin, silky threads. You might also find cocoons of the Promethea silkworm, disguised as dead leaves.

WILDFLOWER #100

Clues: Clouds of yellow pollen drift along damp roads.

© Andrew Block

