

# Add some spice bush to your landscape

By Edna Greig

Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) is a common deciduous shrub native to the woodlands of eastern North America. It is the earliest blooming native woodland shrub, with its flowers opening by early to mid April across most of its range. Although the greenish-yellow, lightly fragrant flowers are quite small, only about 1/8-inch wide, they are arranged in dense clusters along the twigs. When a clump of blooming spicebush is illuminated by slivers of sunshine that pass through the still leafless tree canopy, they can appear to glow bright yellow. For this reason, spicebush is sometimes called the “forsythia of the woods.” But spicebush has a refined beauty and value for wildlife that the cultivated non-native forsythia cannot match.

Spicebush is a member of the laurel family – not to be confused with mountain laurel, (*Kalmia latifolia*) – which is a member of the heath family. It is usually found in the wet parts of the woods, often along streams. It has a multi-branching pattern, and usually grows to a height of about 5 to 15 feet. Its leaves, which open after the flowers bloom, are alternate, entire, egg-shaped or oval, and about 2 to 6 inches long. The leaves are bright green above, and paler beneath. The leaves and slender greenish-brown twigs are spicy-fragrant when crushed, hence the common name of the shrub.

The tiny flowers do not have petals, but have a six-parted calyx (the outermost whorl of a flower). Spicebush is dioecious, meaning that each individual shrub bears either only male or only female flowers. Because the flowers are so small, a hand lens may be needed to determine the sex of an individual shrub. The female (pistillate) flower is distinguished by a single globular ovary in its center. The male (staminate) flower has nine stamens that extend a little bit beyond the calyx lobes. Under similar environmental conditions, male shrubs will bear more flowers than females. This is because it requires a lot more of the shrub's energy to develop the female flowers into fruits and seeds.

The spicebush fruit is a bright red, ovoid drupe (a fleshy fruit with a hard inner coat surrounding a single seed). When crushed, the fruits emit a strong peppery-piney fragrance, and give rise to another of the shrub's common names,

wild allspice. The fruits usually mature over a period of a few weeks in August and September, hidden among the leaves.

Spicebush leaves turn an attractive golden yellow in the autumn.

## Value for Wildlife

Spicebush provides an important early-season source of nectar to small flies and bees, when little else is in bloom. In return, the insects provide the important service of transferring pollen from male shrubs to female shrubs.

Spicebush also is an important larval food plant for native butterflies and moths. The larvae of the beautiful spicebush swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio troilus*) generally feed on either spicebush or sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), another member of the laurel family. The spicebush silk moth (*Callosamia promethea*) – another common name is promethea moth – is a large, showy moth whose larvae often feed on spicebush. The large, voracious larvae of this moth feed in broods, and can strip many leaves from a spicebush shrub in a few late summer days. But the shrub suffers little long-term damage from this assault, and the show is fascinating to watch.

The fruits of spicebush are a favorite food for birds, and by the time it loses its leaves in October, it has few fruits remaining on its twigs.

## Landscape Use

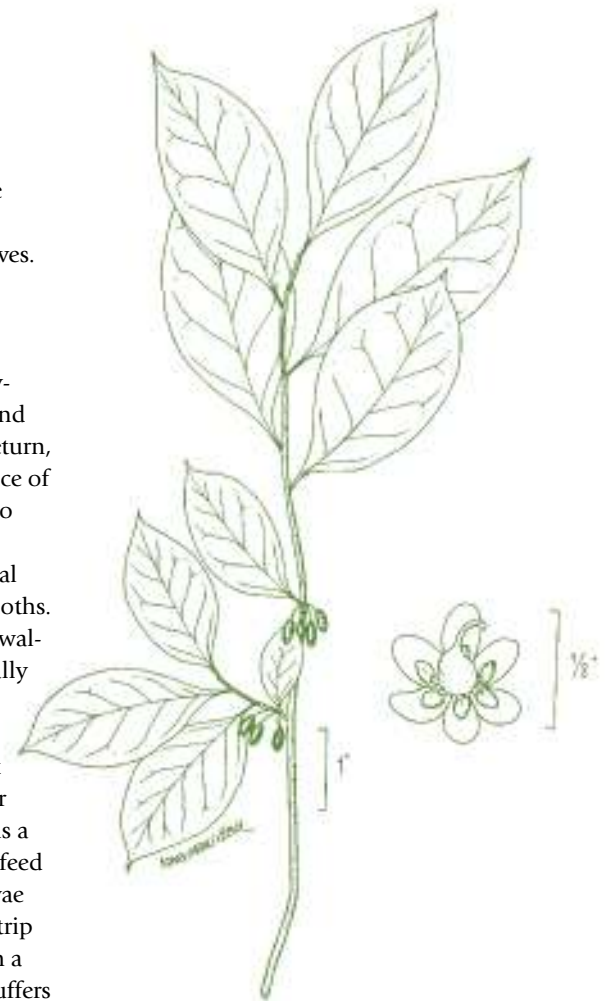
Spicebush is a tough shrub that can add multi-season interest and wildlife attraction to the home landscape. It is suitable for use in a large border, a foundation planting, or naturalized in a woodland planting.

Although it grows mostly in damp areas in its native habitat, spicebush is much more adaptable in the garden. It can be grown successfully in average to even dry soil, especially if it is protected from intense mid-day sun. It can grow in shade, but will look and flower best if it gets at least partial sun. It is not particular about soil pH.

Spicebush is not susceptible to any serious damage from insects or disease. It usually is not browsed by deer.

## Propagation

There are not many commercial sources for spicebush plants, and it is difficult to propagate from cuttings. The best propagation method is by seed, which is relatively easy and reliable. It is best to collect a few



Spice bush (*Lindera benzoin*). Drawing: USDA-NRCS PLANTS database/USDA NRCS.

fruits as soon as they mature in August or September, before the birds get to them. The fleshy part of the fruit should be removed. The seeds then need to be exposed to cold, damp conditions for a period of about three months. This can be achieved by simply planting the seeds outdoors in the fall. They can be planted directly into the ground or in a pot that is covered with netting to keep out burrowing animals. The seeds should germinate the following spring.

Alternatively, the seeds can be placed in the refrigerator, in a plastic bag along with some moist vermiculite, for three months. After this cold treatment, plant the seeds in a pot and, place it either in a greenhouse, indoors under grow lights, or outdoors after the weather warms. The seeds should germinate within a couple of weeks. The seedlings grow quickly, and are best planted in their permanent location before late autumn of their first year. Water well until the plants are established. They should flower the third spring after sowing the seeds. Once the plants are established, they need little attention. ▲