Lindera benzoin (L.) Blume
Spicebush

Lauraceas (Laurel Family)

**Blooming season:** March-May

**Plant:**
- Michigan Big Tree record: 10” girth, 23’ tall, Wayne County.
- Commonly a much branched shrub, to 5 m tall and 7-8 cm in diameter.
- Often multiple stemmed, with arching shape; shallow rooted.
- Dark grey bark is spicy, aromatic; has corky, pale lenticels.
- Twigs greenish, with prominent corky lenticels.
- Terminal winter bud is absent; leaf buds solitary.
- Flower buds conspicuous in fall and winter, in groups of 2-5.

**Leaves:**
- Alternate, deciduous, simple; margin entire.
- Emerge after flowering, often with different sizes on the same shoot.
- From 5-15 cm long and half as wide.
- Obovate to oval, with acute tip.
- Smooth, thin, light green above, paler below.
- Petioles .5-1 cm long.
- Fall color is yellow.

**Flower:**
- Dioecious, occasionally polygamomous (Barnes and Wagner 1981).
- Dense sessile umbels, more conspicuous on staminate plants due to yellow anthers.
- Tiny (.5-1 cm) yellow flowers, consisting of sepals (petals lacking), prior to leaf out.
- In axils of previous year’s leaves.
- Insect pollinated.

**Fruit:**
- Bright red drupe, less than 1.5 cm long.
- Ripens August-September.
- Spicy taste.
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Can be confused with: Spicy taste and fragrance can be compared with and easily differentiated from sassafras (*Sassafras albidum* [Nutt.] Nees). The light colored corky lenticels on the grey bark, absence of terminal leaf buds, and 3 bundle scars assist in identifying. The leaves of alternate leaved dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia* L. f.) have veins following the margins, rather than aiming for the edge.

**Geographic range:**  
Type specimen location:  
State: Southern half of Lower Peninsula.  
Regional: Southern Ontario, Maine, south to Florida and west to Kansas and Texas.

**Habitat:**  
Local: Creek area.  
Regional: Rich deciduous woods, swamp forests, fertile soils. Tolerates high water table, but can grow in somewhat dry conditions.

**Common local companions:**  
Elderberry, red maple, skunk cabbage, and even invasive barberry.

**Usages:**  
Human: Native Americans used the berries as seasoning, either dried and ground or fresh; the leaves, which contain camphor, were used as an insect repellant. They made the twigs into a tea used for menstrual pain, and to bring on the menses. Other teas were used: as a vermifuge; for coughs and colds; and as an emetic. These uses were learned by the colonists, who also made a tea from the leaves, twigs, and bark to be used as a social drink. This species is not the source of the benzoin of the drug trade, which comes from *Styrax* sp.  
Other animal: Insects are required for pollination. Both the green-clouded swallowtail butterfly and the promethea moth use this as a nursery plant. The fruits are eaten by birds and the twigs by white-tailed deer, cottontails, opossum, ruffed grouse, and various songbirds.

**Why is it called that?** *Lindera* is for Johann Linder, a Swedish botanist and physician who lived from 1676 to 1723. *Benzoin* is from “an Arabic vernacular word meaning aromatic gum” (A.W. Smith 1997, p. 58). It is called spicebush both from earlier uses as a spice, and for its spicy aroma and taste.

Prepared by: Barbara Lukacs Grob, April 2008