



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 polygamous (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 repellent. 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.