

The Herb Society of America

Essential Facts for Spicebush

Lindera benzoin



Lindera benzoin fruit
Photo Wikimedia Commons

Family: Lauraceae

Latin Name: *Lindera benzoin*

Common Name: spicebush

Growth: Perennial shrub, 3 to 9 feet tall, yellow flowers

Hardiness: Zone 4b-9a

Light: Partial Shade

Soil: Rich, acidic to basic soil

Water: Mesic, moderately moist

Use: Tea, flavoring, medicinal

Propagation: Seed, clonal via rhizome sprouting, cuttings

History

In 1783, Carl Peter Thunberg honored Johann Linder (1676-1724), a Swedish botanist and physician, by naming the genus *Lindera* in honor of him. The specific epithet *benzoin* is an adaptation of the Middle French *benjoin* (from Arabic *luban jawi*) literally “Java Frankincense” and refers to an aromatic balsamic resin obtained from several species of trees in the genus *Styrax*.

The common name for both *Lindera benzoin* var. *pubescens* and *Lindera benzoin* var. *benzoin* is northern spicebush, though both grow well in the south. *L. benzoin* var. *pubescens* grows as far as the Gulf Coast states and can be distinguished by slightly hairy stems and lower leaf surfaces. *L. benzoin* var. *benzoin* grows further north than the more southerly species and as far south as just above the Gulf Coast area, and has mostly glabrous stems and leaves.

Spicebush had multiple medicinal uses by Creek, Cherokee, Rappahannock, Mohegan and Chippewa tribes, who also used the plant to make a beverage and to flavor game. It has little commercial value now and can be hard to find in nurseries for landscape use.

Description

In the same family with other aromatic shrubs (*Laurus nobilis*, *Cinnamomum* spp., *Persea* spp., and *Sassafras* spp.) spicebush is a deciduous North American shrub that seldom grows more than 8-9 feet tall with a nearly equal, loosely rounded spread. Its entire, obovate (egg-shaped), alternate leaves turn a bright yellow in fall. Small yellow flowers growing in clusters held close to the stem appear in early spring. It is a dioecious plant with only the female plants producing fruits (drupes), assuming the presence of both male and female plants.

Culture

Spicebush is primarily an understory species found in the wild in open forests and along forest edges in rich, moderately moist soil and can also be found along stream banks. It has a wide growing range across the country, subject to winter kill only at the northern extreme of its range. This is an excellent landscape shrub with multiple season interest. It is most spectacular in group plantings



Lindera benzoin flowers
Photo SB Johnny/Wikimedia Commons

rather than as a specimen. It tolerates drought quite well once established and is a slow growing shrub.

The drupes ripen to a bright red in late summer providing food for many bird species. Raccoons, opossums and deer eat them as well and the shrub is a food source for the spicebush swallowtail butterfly.

Propagation

Seed can be harvested in the fall, cleaned and sown the same fall to provide warm stratification before the winter cold stratification cycle. Seed should be sown 0.25 to 0.5 in. deep. Softwood cuttings taken in June or July and placed in sand or a soilless mix root quickly.

Uses

Some describe the fragrance of the leaves, twigs and drupes as citrus-spicy or woody-floral, not unlike allspice, but more subtle and without the nutmeg overtones. The dried drupes have a strong pepper-like taste mellowing to fruity that would be interesting in a variety of baked items such as gingerbread. Recipes for spicebush in ice cream and rice puddings have appeared in magazines, but unfortunately the plant does not have



Lindera benzoin drupes
Photo Debra Knapke



Lindera benzoin fall color
Photo Debra Knapke

GRAS status (FDA generally recognized as safe).

Harvesting

The drupes are harvested when fully ripe (red) and used immediately as a flavoring or dried for later use. Twigs, used medicinally, and the dried drupes are available online (no GRAS status).

Sources

Plant Information Online is a source to links to North American seed and nursery firms. It is a free service of the University of Minnesota Libraries.
<http://plantinfo.umn.edu>

References

Hoss, Gregory 2006. "Propagation Protocol for Spicebush: *Lindera benzoin*." *Native Plants Journal*. 7(2):135-136.

Moerman, Daniel E. *Native American Ethnobotany*. Timber Press, Inc.: Portland, OR, 1998.

Sicuranza, Jenna, Nick Castrataro, Bill Johnson, and Brian Maynard 2005. Softwood Cutting Propagation of Native Lauraceae (*Lindera benzoin* and *Sassafras albidum*) as Alternatives to Invasive Horticulture Plants. *Combined Proceedings International Plant Propagators' Society*. 55:415-417.

Tucker, A.O. and Thomas DeBaggio. *The Encyclopedia of Herbs: a comprehensive reference to herbs of flavor and fragrance*. Timber Press, Inc.: Portland, OR, 2009. pp. 296-297.

Tucker, A.O., M.J. Maciarello, P.W. Burbage, & G. Sturtz 1994. Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin* (L.) Blume var. *benzoin*, Lauraceae): A tea, spice, and medicine. *Economic Botany*. 48:333-336.

USDA Plants Database. Plant Guide "Spicebush: *Lindera benzoin* (L.) Blume." Available online http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_libe3.pdf (Accessed January 23, 2011.)

Medicinal Disclaimer – It is the policy of The Herb Society of America not to advise or recommend herbs for medicinal or health use. This information is intended for educational purposes only and should not be considered as a recommendation or an endorsement of any particular medical or health treatment.

Visit www.herbsociety.org for information on joining The Herb Society of America
9019 Kirtland Chardon Rd. Kirtland, Ohio 44094 440.256.0514, herbs@herbsociety.org

©2010 The Herb Society of America