

Spicebush - *Lindera benzoin*



Blessed are you, Tree of Life*, rooted in heaven
 ...who has given the wood thrush a flute that can wake up the sun.
 ...who gives me light to eat.
 ...whose strength in my fingers cleaves the rock and makes water burst from stone.
 ...who makes busy the soil's dark kitchen, preparing my nourishment.
 ...who drinks the hidden waters through me, as through a straw.
 ...whose rainbow pledge I keep, quelling the flood.
 ...who makes my roots the bulwark of the soil.
 ...who makes me the lungs of the world...
 ...who gives me long years to watch the generations of moving things arise,
 dance their whirlwind dance, and pass away.
 ...who makes the moving things delight in my fruit and blossoms,
 so that they may be my helpers in love.
 ...who makes my fallen leaves the bed of new life.
 ...who will make my fallen trunk a home for new life.
 ...who makes my dead selves the core from which I grow.
 ...who makes me reckon time in circles, like the sun, moon, and stars.
 ...who gives me a coat of fiery colors to brave the winds of fall.
 ...who gives me the deep, white night in which to sleep.
 ...who raises up those who are bowed down with snow.
 ...who clothes the naked in luminous green.
 ...who makes me reach up in joy, like a friend at the wedding,
 to spread your canopy of peace.

* "Tree of Life" is a mystical metaphor for the Divine.
 -Evan Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden*

Caterpillar Café:

Spicebush Swallowtail
 Tiger Swallowtail
 Green Clouded Swallowtail
Prometha Moth
 Yellow Haired Dagger Moth
Cecropia Moth; Io Moth
 Black-waved Flannel Larva
 Tulip Tree Beauty
 Spotted Apatelodes
 Imperial Moth
 Canadian Melanolphis
 (...thus, they have sassy frass!)

What's in a name: *Lindera*, for Swedish botanist John Lindler; *benzoin* for its fragrant resins used in medicine, perfumes and incense.

Other common names:

Wild Allspice; Pondberry; Wild Forsythia; Benjamin Bush. The name *benjamin* likely connects to the name *benzoin* which was the name of its earlier genus.

All in the Family: Laurel Family

Relatives: *Sassafras*; bay leaf, cinnamon, avocado

Spicebush's fragrant lemon-yellow flowers have a spicy fragrance and is a good nectar source in early spring.

Natural History

The plants are usually dioecious, meaning that male and female flowers occur on separate plants. The flowers appear from February to April (before the leaves emerge) and berries ripen in September.

Aromatic leaves are arranged alternately on branches whose bark is speckled with pale lenticels. The leaves turn a soft golden yellow in fall which makes it a popular native shrub in landscaping.

Catbirds, kingbirds, thrushes and other species of song birds feed on the brilliant fleshy red fruits found in late summer on female plants.

Another positive of the plant is its growth habit of slender unbranched stems reaching 10 feet in height. These provide cover and nesting sites for a variety of wildlife.

If for no other reason, plant this native shrub to increase the food available for over a dozen types of butterfly and moth larvae!

Cultural History

The leaf and stem tissues are permeated with terpenes and related fragrant compounds, (similar to *Sassafras*) which are often called "essential oils" and is thus considered to be somewhat "deer resistant" in the garden.

All parts of the plant have been used to make either folk medicines or flavorings for bitters/herbal medicines. It was primarily used as a leaf and twig tea and used to flavor rum.

Bark scrapings were used in a liniment for sore muscles as well as using its waxy compounds for making candles and soap.

Delightful folk stories reflect use of berries being tossed in the stew pot and cooked with an old rooster to tenderize it.

Its shiny red fruits were used ground (fresh or dried) as an allspice substitute to flavor bland flour or grains by native groups and the early pioneers.