

## Northern Spicebush, Fragrant Addition to the Garden

By Susan Camp

This summer has been miserably hot and dry without the usual fast thunderstorms or nights of cooling rain. I spend too many mornings watering and trying to save my perennials from the blistering heat. I love working in the garden when the weather is pleasant, but I can no longer deal with the heat.

The garden once was filled with perennials and just a few shrubs, but in recent years, I have decided that shrubs, especially flowering shrubs, are easier to maintain than perennials. The good thing about shrubs is that they don't all bloom in the spring. Many species bloom into the fall. Witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) blooms from October to December. Some, like hydrangeas, require minimal one-time deadheading. Many deciduous shrubs display striking fall color and produce berries that feed the birds and other wildlife.

Earlier this summer, I wrote about the addition of several Southern Arrowwood (*Viburnum dentatum*) shrubs to our new garden. They are thriving despite the heat, and we are pleased with their progress so far. The inkberry hollies (*Ilex glabra*) got off to a rocky start when three were partly uprooted the first morning by Jim's squirrel nemesis, then served as a bedtime snack for Bambi and his mom.

Jim also planted two Northern spicebushes (*Lindera benzoin*), a species I had wanted for some time. This fast-growing, deciduous member of the Laurel family is native from southeast Canada to central and eastern United States in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 to 9.

Northern spicebush, or just plain spicebush, has a broad, rounded habit and reaches a mature height of 8 to 15 feet with a similar spread. It is considered a woodland understory shrub and will tolerate part to full shade, but also grows well in full sunlight. In full shade, its habit is looser and more open. Curiously, in full sun, the shrub's vigorous growth rate decreases, but flower and fruit production and fall leaf color are reported to improve. In the wild, Northern spicebush grows in open woods and fields and along streams and roadsides.

Spicebush requires moist, well-drained, rich or sandy soils, but will tolerate clay and wet soils. It also tolerates black walnut and deer, although deer will graze on the leaves and twigs. Spicebush has a low flammability rating.

*L. benzoin*'s common name is spicebush for a reason: The twigs and leathery, oval, 5-inch-long, light-green leaves emit a spicy fragrance when crushed. Clusters of tiny, sweet-smelling, apetalous (without petals), greenish-yellow flowers appear along the branches in early spring before the leaves open.

Spicebush is dioecious, meaning that male and female flowers grow on separate plants. Male flowers are larger and more attractive, but pollinated female plants produce large, berrylike bright red drupes in the fall. If you want your female spicebushes to produce drupes, plant three

to five shrubs to encourage drupe production. Songbirds feed on the aromatic drupes, which reportedly have a turpentine-like flavor. The presence of drupes on a spicebush may not be apparent until the leaves drop.

Spicebush is a host plant for the spicebush swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio troilus*), the spicebush or promethea moth (*Callosamia promethea*), the eastern tiger swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio glaucus*), and the palamedes swallowtail (*Papilio palamedes*).

All parts of *Lindera benzoin* are edible. Essential oils from all parts of the plant are sometimes used in teas and the dried fruit to fragrance sachets.

There are no serious disease or insect pest problems, although the plant is susceptible to laurel wilt, a fungal disease of plants in the laurel family. Laurel wilt is spread by the invasive redbay ambrosia beetle.

Spicebush enhances shade or woodland borders and gardens, native plant gardens, and any naturalized setting.

Read more about spicebush in the Penn State Extension publication “Spice Up Your Garden with Spicebush”; NC State Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry “*Lindera benzoin*”; Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry “*Lindera benzoin*”; and “Native Plants for Southeast Virginia Including Hampton Roads Region.”

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