



Pictured is a spicebush butterfly perched on a Mexican sunflower. The spicebush butterfly is so named because the spicebush is its primary host plant.



Photo by Ellen Honeycutt

Native Plant Highlight: Spicebush

Lindera benzoin

By Greg Lewis

This article is courtesy of the Coast Plain Chapter of the Georgia Native Plant Society. The GNPS is dedicated to promoting the stewardship and conservation of Georgia's native plants and their habitats. The Coastal Plain Chapter serves the people in the Coastal Plain ecoregion of Georgia. This includes all areas south of the Fall Line in middle Georgia, from the Alabama and Florida borders to the Atlantic ocean. To learn more, please visit their [website](#).

Description and Care:

For many months of the year, spicebush, *Lindera benzoin* (lin-DARE-ah BEN-zo-in) is a passive, unassuming shrub with attractive dark green foliage that is generally nestled in somewhat moist, woodland areas from Florida to Canada. Unassuming may be slightly hyperbolic, but there is much to see and know about this little woodland gem.



Spicebush care is simple - it takes very little. If there is diseased or damaged wood, prune it. If it gets too unruly for you and you would like a more formal, refined look, prune those unruly parts. If the

spicebush is outgrowing the space you have for it, prune it. It will be best to prune after it flowers in the spring, but before the new growth begins, to avoid trimming the flower buds set the previous year.

5 Benefits of Planting Spicebush

So, why would you want spicebush in your landscape or garden? Spicebush has many benefits to wildlife: it provides food for birds and small animals, serves as host plant for the spicebush swallowtail butterfly, and is a nectar (food source) plant for many pollinators. Taking all that into account, there are at least five reasons one would want this modest shrub in a garden or landscape: the foliage, the flower, the fruit, the caterpillar, and the spicebush swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio troilus*).

ONE

Spicebush has dark green foliage making it a handsome hedge or backdrop for groundcovers and wildflowers. By fall, the dark green foliage

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will turn yellow. While it thrives in full sun, it also does well in partial shade in zones 4-9; some sun aids the flowers and fruit production. Spicebush generally is found in moist areas and can grow successfully in a range of moisture conditions including very wet soil, moist, well-drained soil, and occasionally dry soil. It can grow between 6-12 feet tall and wide, so caretakers can decide how to best use it in their space. While spicebush may not typically be used as a specimen tree, it is a perfect way to add native plants to the landscape. It can be used in rain gardens, woodland gardens, and even along rivers, creeks, and ponds.

TWO

The yellow flowers are dioecious—appearing as attractive, dainty flowers in spring, from March to May. The flowers open before the leaves emerge and are held close to the branches. They are a pollinator favorite and one other thing, they are fragrant!



Photo by Ansel Oommen

Dioecious plants like spicebush house the male and female flowers on different plants. The male plants have male flowers and female plants have only female flowers. If you have a female shrub with a male nearby, leave the flowers on to produce fall fruit. Having fruit does not affect whether the plant attracts spicebush swallowtails, but the fruit does provide an additional reason to employ spicebush. Typically, the nursery trade sells plain ole spicebush—with no delineation of male or female. To increase the likelihood of getting male and female plants for the fruit, the homeowner and landscaper should consider buying multiple plants to increase the opportunities of having the fruit for a fall feast for the birds and animals.

THREE

Fruit is another reason to consider planting spicebush. By late summer, in August or September, spicebush will have green drupes that turn red when they mature. Remember, to get the fruit you need both male and female plants. The leaves and fruit can be crushed to provide the spice scent—sometimes used as a substitute for allspice.

The fruit (spicebush seed) provides food for birds and small animals. If there is any fruit remaining



Photo by Ansel Oommen

after the birds and animals have their fill, they make a lovely viewing for humans. So, spicebush provides pleasing visual and olfactory opportunities.

FOUR

If the dark green foliage, yellow flowers, red fruit are not enough to draw one to the spicebush, then there is the caterpillar. Visitors to my nursery are generally underwhelmed when I show them the spicebush; that is, until we unfurl one of the folded-up leaves and discover the caterpillar huddled inside. Then they are beyond thrilled. In fact, our grandkids ask about the caterpillars in the leaves; they provide such a sense of wonderment and intrigue.

These little creatures are so fascinating, beginning life looking like bird poop before changing to look

Photo by Ansel Oommen



Photo by Greg Lewis

more like a snake (notice the large eyespots). Eventually they transform into the stunning spicebush swallowtail butterfly.

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How do you know if you have some of those caterpillars lurking on your spicebush? Well, the caterpillar folds the leaf partially or in half. The larger snake-like caterpillars fold the leaf in half, while the smaller caterpillars, which resemble bird poop, will partially fold over a leaf.

FIVE

The final attraction of spicebush is the spicebush swallowtail butterfly. Spicebush is the host plant for this beautiful pollinator. The spicebush swallowtail is a wonderful surprise to anyone who has the good fortune to cross its path.

Any one of these five are reason enough to have this (did I really call it unassuming earlier?) shrub where you can enjoy it. Once it is established, spicebush is easy to maintain having few “enemies” seeking to destroy it. I encourage you to find some spicebush and follow it for a year to enjoy the green and yellow foliage, lovely yellow flowers, red fruit, brown and green caterpillar, and the impressive spicebush swallowtail butterfly. 

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