



# Cultivation Notes

#24 September 1998 Vol. 12, No. 2

## Spicebush

*Lindera benzoin*

By Betsy Keiffer

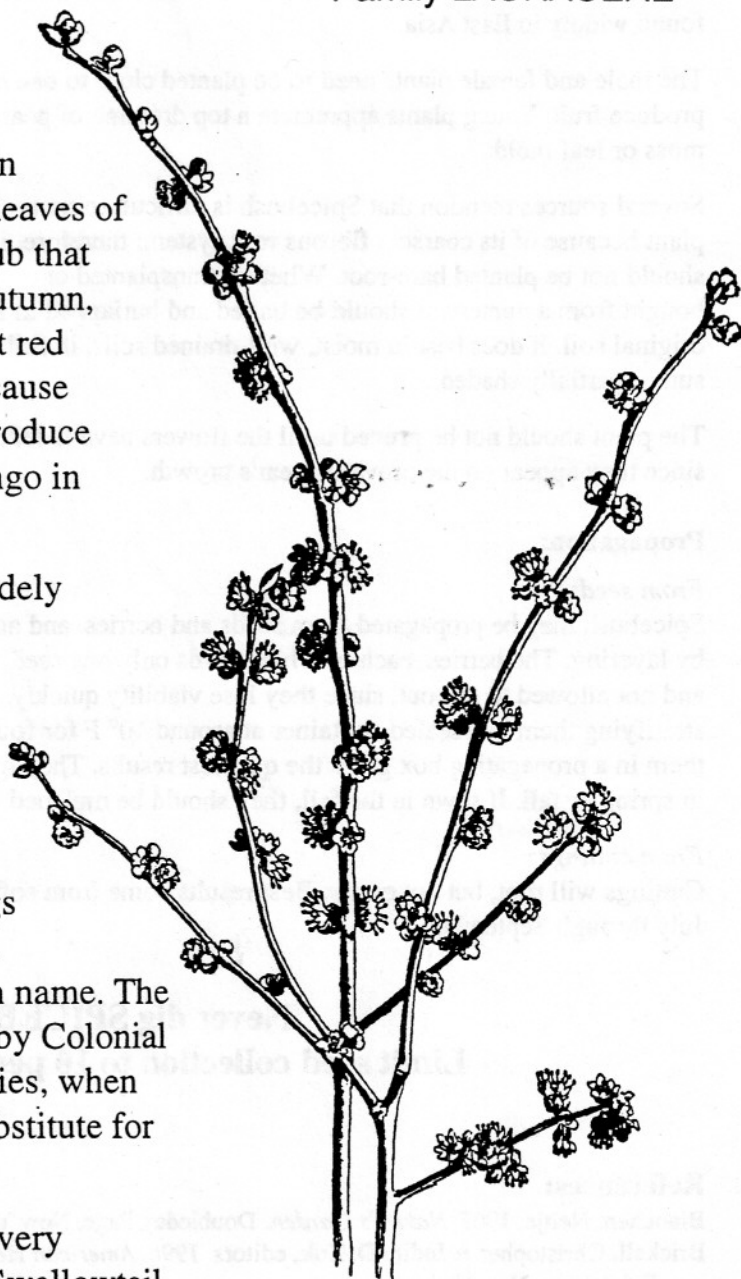
Family LAURACEAE

While walking in moist deciduous woodlands in the spring, keep an eye out for the showy yellow leaves of *Lindera benzoin*, or Spicebush. It is a modest shrub that flaunts its charms most obviously in spring and autumn, but even after the leaves fall, half-inch long bright red berries are eye-catching on the female plants. Because Spicebush is a dioecious shrub, the male plants produce no fruit — another example of it taking two to tango in the plant world.

Spicebush, which is not cultivated nearly as widely as it deserves, is a nice addition to woodland gardens. Highly shade tolerant, it is almost always found under a tree canopy of some sort. Its tiny yellow pompom-like flowers, borne densely in axillary clusters on the naked branches in mid-April, are a welcome surprise and herald of spring. Both the leaves and the twigs give off a delightful nose-tingling spiciness when crushed between the fingers — hence its common name. The young twigs, leaves, and berries were often used by Colonial housewives to make an aromatic tea, and the berries, when dried and crushed, are said to be a satisfactory substitute for allspice in baking.

*L. benzoin* is rarely troubled by pests, and it is very attractive to butterflies, including the Spicebush Swallowtail Butterfly. Many birds, including the Veery and the Wood Thrush, relish its fruits.

Planted singly, Spicebush does not make a dramatic statement, but a cluster of bushes in a woodland setting can be most appealing.



## CULTIVATION NOTES

*Lindera benzoin* Spicebush, Benjamin-bush, Fever Bush, Wild Allspice

Spicebush is a dense, deciduous shrub that grows to as much as 15 feet. It is a Rhode Island native and widely distributed in the United States. Spicebush is found in damp woods or on river banks from Maine to Florida and Texas, wherever soil is moist and on the acidic side. It is also found widely in East Asia.

The male and female plants need to be planted close to one another in order to produce fruit. Young plants appreciate a top dressing of peat moss or leaf mold.

Several sources mention that Spicebush is difficult to transplant because of its coarsely fibrous root system; therefore, it should not be planted bare-root. Whether transplanted or bought from a nursery, it should be balled and burlapped in its original soil. It does best in moist, well-drained soils, in full sun or partially shaded.

The plant should not be pruned until the flowers have faded, since they appear on the previous year's growth.

### Propagation:

#### From seed:

Spicebush may be propagated from seeds and berries, and according to Wyman, by layering. The berries, each of which holds only one seed, should be gathered ripe and not allowed to dry out, since they lose viability quickly. Authorities agree that stratifying them in a sealed container at around 40° F for four months, then sowing them in a propagating box gives the quickest results. They may also be sown outdoors in spring or fall. If sown in the fall, they should be mulched over the winter.

#### From cuttings:

Cuttings will root, but not easily. Best results come from softwood cuttings taken from July through September.

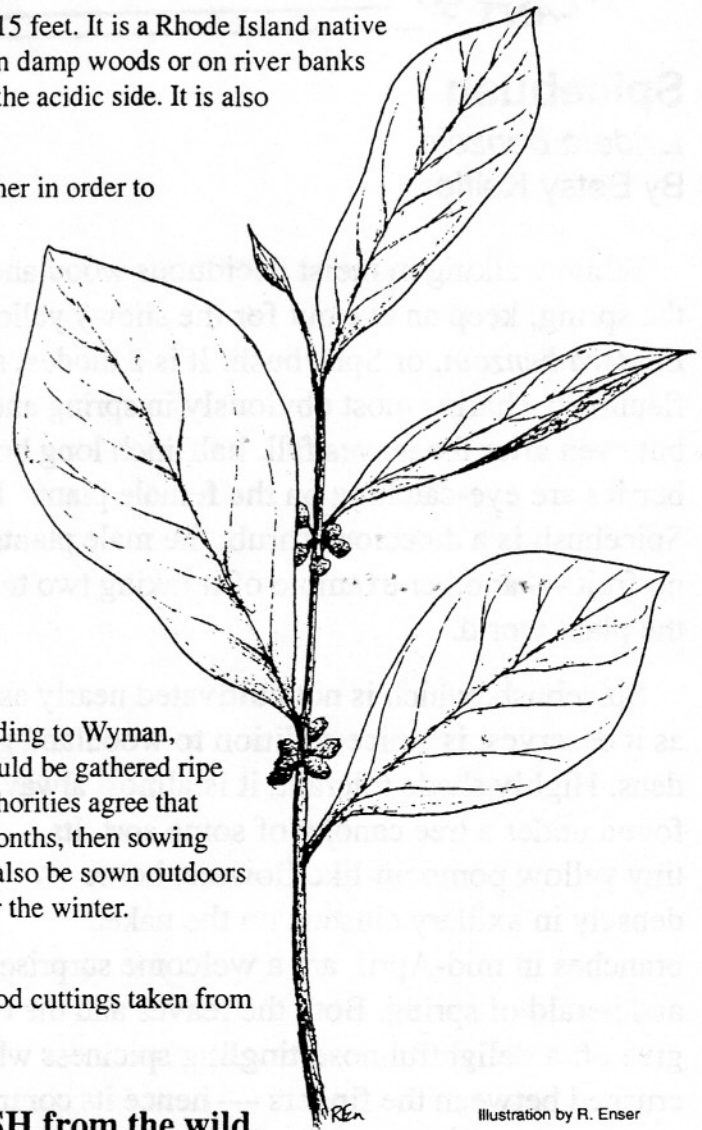


Illustration by R. Enser

**Never dig SPICEBUSH from the wild.  
Limit seed collection to 10 per cent or less of available fruits.**

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