

[Other Excerpts from This Book](#), [Overview of This Book](#), [Other Books](#), [More Plants](#), [Buy This Book](#), [Home](#)

Common Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)



Let's kick it up a notch...**Bam!**

From [Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants in Wild \(and Not So Wild\) Places](#)

Illustrations and photos by "Wildman," clipart from Clipart.com



Common Spicebush Leaves and Berries

Note the smooth-edged, oval, pointed, alternate leaves and oblong, red berries.

This 5-20 feet tall, spreading bush is a native member of the laurel family. The bushes are usually colonial, spreading by the roots. Crush or scratch the thin, brittle twigs, or any part of spicebush to release its lemony-spicy fragrance.

The bright green, alternate, toothless, pointy-tipped, stalked leaves are elliptical, 2-6" long.



Young Spicebush Twig

Unlike other shrubs, some of the leaves never get large.

In the early spring, before the leaves appear, dense clusters of tiny, yellow flowers in the axils scent the air, attracting early-season insects.



Spicebush Flowers

Note the tight cluster of globular flowers.



Spicebush Flower

Each tiny, radially symmetrical flower has cream-colored petals and protruding, yellow, pollen-bearing stigmas.



Spicebush in Flower

The leafless spicebush is festooned with tiny yellow flowers in early spring.

The spiciest parts are the hard, oval, stalked, scarlet berries, each with one large seed.



Spiceberries, Unripe and Ripe

Finely chopped, the ripe berries are a superb seasoning.

They grow in clusters, from the leaf axils of the female bushes, in autumn.



Spicebush with Berries

This spicebush is at its peak!

Look for spicebushes in damp, partially shaded, rich woodlands, on mountains' lower slopes, in thickets, and along stream banks, throughout the Eastern United States, except the northernmost regions. Pioneers knew that this was

good soil for farms, with moist, fertile soil.

The berries, which taste a little like allspice, are an irreplaceable seasoning for me. Rinse them, pat them dry, and chop them in a blender or spice grinder. If you have neither, put them under a towel and crush them with a hammer. Some people remove the seeds, but I crush them along with the rest of the berries.

Since spiceberries are ripe in apple season, they often find themselves in the same pot. I love compotes with sliced apples, walnuts, orange rind and spiceberries, simmered about 15 minutes. Spiceberries don't go quite so well with some other later autumn fruits, such as autumn olives and [persimmons](#). Wild raisins, on the other hand, get a much-needed zing from spiceberries. The seasoning is also wonderful for main courses, and in pastries, like commercial allspice.

To store long-range, don't dry the berries. They're too oily, and may go rancid at room temperature. Spread the chopped berries out on a plate or cookie sheet and freeze them, then pack into a freezer container. This way, you can remove small amounts of herb as needed, and your seasoning doesn't stick together. I think 1/2 teaspoon is plenty for a recipe that serves six, but depends on your personal preference.

Collect the twigs year-round for teas, or use the leaves from mid spring to fall. In one cup of water, steep either 1/2 cup of fresh leaves (dried leaves lose their flavor) or twigs, or two tablespoons of chopped berries.

Pioneers called this plant fever bush because a strong bark decoction makes you sweat, activating the immune system and expelling toxins. They used it for typhoid and other fevers, and to expel worms. I use a tincture of the leaves, along with wild ginger and field garlic, plus as vitamin C and zinc lozenges, at the first sign of a cold or sore throat, and it sometimes works.

The Indians used a spiceberry infusion for coughs, colds, delayed menstruation, croup, and measles. They used the oil from the berries, externally, for chronic arthritis. It's also good for flatulence and colic. Spicebush leaf, bark, or berry tea compresses are also good for mild skin irritations, such as rashes, itching, and bruises.



Spicebush Leaves and Berries

The berries often form small clusters along the twigs.

Addenda:

[Paula Morgan](#) notified me that country folk used to tenderize game and reduce its rankness by laying it on fresh spicebush twigs. They'd also use it to tenderize the meat of old roosters.

As a vegetarian, this inspires me to experiment with spicebush twigs as part of a marinade to tenderize middle-aged chicken mushrooms or black-staining polypores, which tend toward toughness.

I'll also try adding them to a pot of beans, to see if they get soft faster. Even if that doesn't work, it should add to the flavor.

[Spicebush Recipes](#)

[Other Excerpts from This Book](#), [Overview of This Book](#), [Other Books](#), [More Plants](#), [Buy This Book](#), [Home](#), [Back to the Top](#)