Species You Should Know

Spicebush, *Lindera benzoin*

Have you ever smelled the crushed leaves of Spicebush? Someone should make perfume from it!

This attractive shrub is quite conspicuous during the spring when the flowers bloom; it is one of the first shrubs to bloom in wooded areas - other than invasives! During the summer, it fades into the background and becomes rather ordinary-looking. During the fall, Spicebush becomes attractive once again when its leaves turn yellow and its fruit becomes bright red. High in fat content, the berries are quickly eaten by various species of birds.

This woody shrub is about 5-15 feet tall and has many branches. The central trunk (if present) and larger branches are rather slender; their bark is brown, shiny, and sparsely covered with small white lenticels. These lenticels are circular-angular in shape. The slender branchlets are shiny and brown; their lenticels are white, dot-like, and insignificant.

It is characterized by:
- alternate leaved, ovate or ovate-obovate, smooth along margins, wedge-shaped bottoms, hairless.
- leaves are medium green on the upper surface, and pale green on the lower surface
- larger leaves are up to five inches long and two and a half inches across
- yellow flowers are perfect or dioecious (male & female flowers on separate shrubs); they occur in small clusters along the branchlets before the leaves develop
- each fertile flower is replaced by a fleshy ovoid drupe with a single stone; this drupe becomes red when it is mature eaten by various species of birds.

This shrub prefers dappled sunlight to medium shade, moist to mesic conditions, and a fertile loamy soil with decaying organic matter. It is adaptable to cultivation in yards and gardens. The native spicebush is common in the southern half of Illinois, occasional in northeast Illinois, and largely absent in the northwest section of the state. Habitats include rich deciduous woodlands, wooded bluffs, bottomland forests along rivers, wooded slopes (usually toward the bottom), and gravelly seeps in shaded areas. While spicebush is fairly shade-tolerant, it benefits from occasional disturbances that reduce the dense shade of some canopy trees, particularly sugar maple and American beech.

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