

Technical Report



Wetland Flora

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Gene Silberhorn

Spice Bush

Lindera benzoin (L.) Blume

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Spice bush is a deciduous, alternate, simple leaved shrub commonly found in forested wetlands. *Lindera benzoin* seldom grows over 2 meters tall and is often multi-trunked. Leaves have smooth (entire) margins and are variable in size. Small yellow flowers develop along branches before foliation in the spring. By May, after successful pollination, fleshy bright green drupes are evident, and turn bright red by midsummer. An enduring and diagnostic characteristic of this shrub is the spicy fragrance of crushed leaves and young twigs. The odor is very similar to sassafras, *Sassafras albidum*. Both species belong to the laurel family (Lauraceae), whose members are typically aromatic. The leafy slender branches typically droop slightly under the weight of the foliage and fruit. A number of shrubs have simple, alternate leaves, but the entire leaf margins, highly variable leaf size and spicy odor of the spice bush are not typical of most shrubs.

Distribution

Spice bush is found throughout Virginia, the eastern United States south to Florida, and southeastern Canada. In the southern part of its range, *Lindera benzoin* may attain a small tree-like lifeform.

Habitat

Spice bush is a very common shrub in palustrine forested wetlands. Associated shrubs in this habitat are highbush blueberry, *Vaccinium corymbosum*; swamp dogwood, *Cornus amomum*; sweet pepperbush, *Clethra alnifolia*; elderberry, *Sambucus canadensis*; and paw paw, *Asimina triloba* (Wetland Flora, No. 93-12/ November 1993). *Lindera benzoin* is also a frequent ecotone (transition zone) shrub along the margins of cypress-tupelo swamps and higher riverine terraces of the Blackwater and Nottoway rivers of southeastern Virginia. Curiously, spice bush in North Carolina is more common in piedmont and mountain wetlands than on the coastal plain.

Ecological Values / Benefits

Lindera benzoin affords excellent cover for wildlife, browse for deer, and food (fruits) for birds and other creatures. The fleshy drupe is digestible, but the hardened seed, similar to the pit of a plum only much smaller, is not digestible and is hence disseminated by birds and other animals such as raccoons and opossums. Fleshy fruits are common propagules of wetland shrubs, making them a valuable wildlife food.

Hydrophytic Factor / Wetland Indicator Status

As listed in the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia 1988*, *Lindera benzoin* is classified as a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)**. FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%)."

Lindera benzion (L.) Blume



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