

NATURALLY: Spicebush is an Appalachian treasure

- By DR. DANA DRISCOLL Special to the Gazette
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Dr. Dana Driscoll

The northern spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), a small understory tree or large shrub that is bountiful and native in our region, ranges throughout the Appalachian Mountains and beyond, from Maine to northern Florida.

Spicebush offers benefits to wildlife and is a delightful, regional food and spice that adds unique flavors to any dish. Spicebush is a wonderful tree to find easily and identify, joyful to harvest and absolutely delicious.

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In White's Woods, spicebush is a dominant understory tree and can be found along many of the trails, including those leading up to the overlook from the 12th street parking area. There are also large amounts of spicebush in other local parks, including Blue Spruce and Yellow Creek.

Spicebush, which usually grows in areas with wet, fertile soil as well as areas that are rich in limestone, has light brown branches with green first-year growth, and soft, rounded leaves. Similar to sassafras, if you break a leaf and smell it, it has a spicy, sweet aroma.

Spicebush is a critical source of food and habitat for wildlife. White-tailed deer and eastern cottontail rabbit feed on the leaves, twigs and berries, especially in the winter months. Likewise, a large variety of birds, including game birds and songbirds, feed on the berries in fall and winter.

Spicebush is host to two butterflies — the Spicebush Swallowtail (*papilio troilus*) and the Promethea Silk Moth (*callosamia promethea*). The Spicebush Swallowtail lays eggs on spicebush, and then the larvae curl up the leaves to create a cocoon.

One unique characteristic of spicebush is that it blooms extremely early, around mid-March here in Indiana county. It is often blooming around the same time that you would see skunk cabbage arising and when there may still be snow on the ground. Spicebush blooms are small clusters of bright yellow and have a fragrant smell of lemon.

Spicebush has a range of names, many speaking to its usefulness as a spice and in cooking, including wild allspice, Appalachian allspice, spicewood, feverbush, snapbush, snapwood, and Benjamin-Bush. Spicebush was used extensively by both indigenous Americans and colonists here in Pennsylvania, but is something of a lost spice today. A growing interest in wild food foraging is starting to bring the harvesting and use of spicebush into its rightful place in our regional cuisine once more.

The spicebush berry is the most commonly used and harvested part of the tree, which can be harvested either green (in the summer) or red (in the fall, usually in late August and early September in our region). After harvesting either kind of berry, you can use a dehydrator and place on the "herb" setting. Or, you can simply set them in a warm place and they will dry in a few weeks' time. Once dry, you can grind them in a mortar and pestle or use a pepper grinder. You will want to make sure they are finely ground before using. The green spicebush berry has a very peppery flavor while the spicebush has a warming and delicious flavor.

For a simple meat rub or roasted vegetable seasoning using the red berries, combine 1 tablespoon salt, 2 teaspoons spicebush berries, one-half teaspoon garlic powder, 1 teaspoon onion powder, 1 teaspoon paprika, and 1 tablespoon brown sugar. This rub goes well on steak, roast, or pork chops. Rub on the meat and allow to marinate at least 30 minutes before cooking. For a simple vegetable seasoning, combine the above ingredients, omitting the brown sugar.

Spicebush twigs and leaves can be made into a fragrant, slightly spicy tea that is reminiscent of a chai. This is one of my favorite wild teas when I'm camping or foraging. I always look forward to this warming tea on a gentle summer night.

The second way you can make tea when there are not leaves is by harvesting fresh twigs. To make a tea from the twigs, just brew them up with a lid on for 20-30 minutes (using low heat or even a crockpot to preserve the flavor). The twig tea is similar to the spicebush leaf tea: spicy, warming, and slightly sweet, somewhat reminiscent of sassafras, but with its own unique aroma.

As with all wild foods, harvest them only when abundant, taking only a small amount (less than 5 percent) of the total to ensure enough for the species to survive and leaving enough for wildlife. Do not harvest wild foods on public lands, as overharvesting by multiple individuals can lead to declines in healthy plant populations. Harvesting ethically and carefully on private lands can ensure that the population of spicebush stays healthy for future generations.

I hope that you will have a chance to meet and enjoy the wonderful spicebush!

The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.