The common spicebush, *Lindera benzoin*, is one of the our first native shrubs to bloom in the spring. The bright yellow flowers emerge from little round buds before the leaves appear. People mistake it for forsythia, but don’t be fooled!

The spicebush is in the laurel family (Lauraceae). Like many members of this family, most parts of the plant contain aromatic oils. Familiar foods and spices like avocado, bay leaf, cinnamon, and sassafras are in the laurel family. The bright red berries of spicebush, if properly prepared, can be dried and ground for use as a peppercorn substitute. But please don’t pick the berries; the birds need them more than you.
Spicebush is also a host plant for the spicebush swallowtail. These caterpillars and butterflies primarily live and feed on plants in the laurel family.

Spicebush Swallowtail Butterfly
Papila troilus

dark front wings with yellow spots along the outer edges

Spicebush Swallowtail Caterpillar

back wings also have a row of blue patches plus a red spot on the inside of each wing

There are seven species of Lindera in the Arnold Arboretum collection. There are a few outliers but the majority are located on Bussey Hill Road across from the lilacs (*). If you seek out this cluster you will find a number of Lindera benzoin, the common spicebush, that was collected by Michael Dosmann the Keeper of the Living Collections.