Because it blends in with many of its neighbors, first encounters with spicebush often have more to do with our sense of smell than sight.

Perhaps when walking on a streamside trail you have been overwhelmed by an exotic spicy aroma reminiscent of a wine cellar or allspice. Upon closer examination for the source, you find a beautiful shrub with lush, bright green foliage that, when brushed against, or certainly when crushed, is the origin of this fragrance. If your eyes work better than your nose, maybe you stopped upon noticing a profusion of reddish flowers with the general appearance of water lilies or small magnolias mixed among the foliage. Either way, spicebush is a nose- or eye-popping plant.

Spicebush (*Calycanthus occidentalis*), also known as western sweetshrub, is a deciduous shrub fairly common to the north state’s foothills and mountains. It grows in moist places along streams, ponds, lakes, springs, and in shady canyons. The species is the only member of its family, Calycantheae, and its genus, *Calycanthus*, living in California. One other species of *Calycanthus* grows in the eastern United States, and closely related plants occur in China; a pattern that suggests spicebush is a very old species that once had a much wider range.

The shrub has a roundish appearance and a dense habit. It is typically 5 to 8 feet tall and supported by many slate-brown stems. The large leaves are 3 to 6 inches long and 1 to 3 inches wide. The showy and unusual straplike flower petals are wine red or maroon in color and 1 to 2 inches in diameter. The flowers appear in spring and continue blooming well into the summer. These flowers eventually give way to fruits—1 inch long, urn-shaped brown capsules that
remain after the leaves have fallen for the year and house the next generation of seeds.

In north state gardens, spicebush does quite well and will grow in full sun to partial shade. It will be most happy with a little summer watering or when planted in a wetter location. In my yard, spicebush plants are located in a border that receives a little lawn water overspray and has partial shade.

The plants start flowering around May and continue through August. Deciduous leaves provide a bit of fall color and the dense stems give sparrows, juncos, finches, and other wintering birds ample cover.

The shrub softens walls and fences and provides a nice transition from low-growing plants to larger shrubs or trees. Once established, spicebush is fairly fast growing and will begin to spread. It can be used to create a thicket or informal hedge. If a specimen plant is what you prefer, the spread can be controlled by light pruning. The plant is resistant to oak root fungus and is insect and disease free.

The combination of fragrance, showy flowers, bright-green spring foliage, pale-gold fall foliage, decorative woody fruits, and attractive winter stems makes spicebush an attractive addition to your home garden.

Dry seed pods of the spicebush. Photo by Len Lindstrand III.