In the Winter 1969 issue of the “Arboretum Bulletin,” then-curator Joe Witt wrote an article about new and unusual plants in the Washington Park Arboretum. In it, he whimsically refers to the phenomenon of “Junglitis,” which results, he says, from “the unfortunate attempt to grow large plants in small gardens.” Joe believed that one mission of the Arboretum was to battle against Junglitis by introducing and exhibiting “potentially useful small trees and shrubs.”

One promising plant Joe discussed was *Lindera obtusiloba*, Japanese spicebush, so named because its flowers, leaves and stems have a subtle but enticing spicy scent. He planted three specimens by the wooden footbridge in the Woodland Garden in 1963, and two of them still grow there today. The thing is, over the decades, they’ve gotten pretty big!

Based on the evidence Joe had back then, we can excuse him for miscategorizing *L. obtusiloba* as a good fit for a small garden. Having received...
seeds in 1955, he noted that it took six years to grow the plants to a size—probably about four feet high—capable of being planted out in the Arboretum. (The first specimens from this accession were installed in the brand new Japanese Garden in 1961.) Joe then noted that in 1969 all the plants from this batch were between eight and 10 feet tall and slightly less in spread. This is a growth rate of about seven-to-nine inches per year for the first 14 years—quite within the accepted range of a small tree.

However, 54 years later, one of the surviving specimens in the Woodland Garden has reached 18 feet tall and has spread to more than 36 feet wide, dominating the slope that connects this area to the Winter Garden (now named in honor of Joe Witt). Clearly, this has exceeded the expectations of the gardeners of the day, as evidenced not only by Joe’s article but also by the fact that two of the Woodland Garden specimens were planted only six feet apart!

**FABULOUS FLOWERS AND FOLIAGE**

Native to Japan, Korea, and central and southern China, *Lindera obtusiloba* is a stellar, all-season showstopper. Around mid-March, its bright-yellow, star-shaped flowers emerge in lavish quantities from the bare stems, providing a welcome contrast to the often dour weather days. The individual flowers are tiny, but they are borne in groups of five to great effect: Imagine a big shrub infested with clusters of large, fuzzy, pure-yellow floral bumble bees! Actual insects, such as bees and flies, are attracted to the flowers for their nectar and pollen resources.

*Lindera obtusiloba* is dioecious—meaning male and female flowers appear on separate plants—and though the flowers of male and female plants are almost indistinguishable in form and color, it has been noted in the records of the Arboretum that female specimens sometimes flower only sparsely.

The oval-to-heart-shaped leaves of Japanese spicebush are four-to-six inches long and wide, and they contribute a gentle, opulent texture to any woodland garden. Similar to those of sassafras trees (*Sassafras* species), to which spicebush is related, the leaves are polymorphic, meaning they come in different shapes on the same plant. Some are “entire,” or unlobed, others are bi-lobed (looking mitten-like, with one lobe smaller than the other), while most are three-lobed, resembling a wide trident. The number of leaf lobes follows a distinct pattern on each individual twig. Leaves near the base of the twig are entire, while the terminal leaves near the end of each twig are always three-lobed. In between the two, you’ll find the occasional mitten leaf. (The species name *obtusiloba* turns out to be a misnomer.
because although some of the leaf lobes are obtuse or blunt at the apex, and others are acute or sharply pointed.)

In autumn, the leaves turn a rich, buttery yellow, even in significant shade. For its exceptional fall color, the plant received the Award of Garden Merit in 1952 from the Royal Horticulture Society. On female plants, shiny black fruits develop and are a handsome contrast to the fall color. Large, round, yellow-to-red flower buds also develop on the branches in fall and offer additional ornamental interest over the winter months.

AN AROMATIC FAMILY

The genus Lindera is made up of about 80 to 100 species, mostly native to Asia. You’ll find several of these in the Arboretum, including L. benzoin, one of three species from eastern North America. Lindera is a member of the Lauraceae (laurel family), an ancient lineage that includes such valued trees as the avocado (Persea americana), sweet bay (Laurus nobilis), and cinnamon (Cinnamomum species)—and as mentioned, sassafras (Sassafras species). Many laurel family members contain high concentrations of essential oils that make them useful for cooking, cosmetics and medicine.

The culinary uses of Japanese spicebush include the frying of leaves for Buddhist ceremonial dishes. The buds and leaves are a rich source of essential oils and phytochemicals that have long been used in traditional medicines for improvement of circulation and fever reduction, and for the treatment of allergies, rheumatoid arthritis and liver diseases. Contemporary medicinal research has confirmed that the polyphenols, lignans, neolignans, flavonoids and butenolides found in L. obtusiloba have neuroprotective, cytotoxic, anti-inflammatory, anti-allergic and anti-thrombotic properties. Studies are underway to develop treatments for neurodegenerative disorders and cancer using Japanese spicebush extracts.

Japanese spicebush is hardy to at least USDA Zone 6. Though it can handle full sun in the Pacific Northwest, the plant prefers partial shade, appreciates summer water, and can grow in most soils as long as they are not water-logged.

WOODLAND GARDEN SPECIMENS

Seed for the plants by the Woodland Garden bridge (accession numbers 405-55 A, C, and D) came to us in 1955 from the Missouri Botanical Garden. It was wild-collected near the city of Toyama, Japan, near the Japanese Alps. According to Joe Witt, this is close to the most-northerly limits of the natural range of Lindera obtusiloba and so represents about as hardy a strain as can be found.

The specimen planted closest to the trail (qualifier C) needed to be removed in 2001 because it began to overgrow the trail, while at the same time becoming overgrown by the specimens behind it. (Proving that Junglitis can happen even in a 230-acre Arboretum!) In the three years leading up to the summer of 2019, major stems on specimen 405-55D slowly died back to the trunk, in the manner of a Verticillium wilt infection. (The cause of the dieback was unconfirmed, but Verticillium is known to exist within the Woodland Garden). Despite its truncated condition, the specimen has persisted and still provides a delightful flower and foliage show.

Over the intervening years, new specimens of Lindera obtusiloba have been added to the Arboretum collection, attesting to its charms. These include a very recent addition on Lake Washington Boulevard, right across from the Japanese Garden entrance, as part of the Boulevard Corridor restoration project.

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REFERENCES