

Bay

Laurus nobilis

(sweetbay, bay laurel, bay leaf)



Sweet bay, or bay laurel is an evergreen tree which may grow to 40 feet in its native Mediterranean regions, though in Zones 8-10 in the U.S., it can grow from 6 to 25 feet if protected from winter winds. It is adaptable to pot growing in colder climates, grown outdoors in summer and as an ordinary houseplant in winter. Potgrown plants can be clipped into topiary forms.

Description: The tree or woody potted shrub bears dense, pointed, elliptical leaves, rather leathery in texture, bright green when young and darker green whenure. Leaves may have smooth or crenate margins; there is a variegated form. The aroma of the leaves is not free; leaves have to be rubbed to release it. In warm areas bays bear yellowish-white fluffy flowers and small black fruit. Pot-grown bays seldom flower and fruit.

Culture: In warm climates where seed is produced, seed may take six months to a year to germinate. Wood that is just beginning to harden makes the best cuttings, but even these take up to three months to root under the best conditions. This explains why potted small bays cost more than other herbs. The potted herb may be moved up as it grows to the largest pot size that is convenient, and thereafter maintained at that size by pruning the rootball and top pruning, filling in with new soil in the space created. When moving the plant outside in warmer weather, it must be acclimated to the sun or the leaves will burn. Unfortunately, bays are subject to scale insects; it can be treated with horticultural oil, or one can clean scale off the leaves with Q-tips dipped in alcohol

Uses: In classical times, bay laurel was made into wreaths to crown poets, scholars and athletes. Culinarily, the leaf is added at the beginning of cooking soups and stews and slowly imparts a deep, rich flavor. The leaf is left whole so it can be retrieved before serving the dish. Medicinally, bay laurel has been used as an antiseptic and a digestive. An old use is to put leaves in containers of rice or flour to deter weevils. The leaves dry easily on the stem. Fresh leaves are stronger than dried ones.

Other species called bay or laurel: Mountain laurel, *Kalmia latifolia*, is a flowering shrub with large trusses of pink flowers, but it is not only inedible but also

poisonous to humans and most other animals. Bayberry, *Myrica pensylvanica*, is the shrub bearing waxy grey berries from which candles are made; though early colonists used the leaves as a bay laurel substitute, the flavor is inferior. *Umbellularia californica* is a California tree called California laurel, and has been used and even sold commercially as a bay laurel substitute, but the leaves contain the substance umbellulone, "which is toxic to the central nervous system when ingested and causes convulsive sneezing, headaches, and sinus irritation when inhaled deeply."*

Sources:

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