



# Bay Laurel

*Laurus nobilis* L.

Lauraceae

## Species description

Bay laurel is an evergreen tree or large shrub with dense foliage and shiny grey bark. Leaves are pointed, elliptical, thick and leathery in texture, smooth along the margins, and bright green and glossy when young and darker green when mature. The leaves must be crushed to release the aromatic oils. The tree is dioecious, with male and female flowers on separate trees. The flowers are pale yellow-green, and borne in pairs beside the leaf. The fruit is a small black berry that matures in early autumn and contains a single seed.



## Natural and cultural history

Bay laurel is native to the Mediterranean region of southern Europe, the Middle East, Western Asia, and North Africa. Bay laurel forests used to grow extensively in these regions, and are now more isolated, though the species is still widespread. In natural habitats, the tree thrives in canyons, ravines, mountainsides, and thickets, and may be found growing near old stone walls. This species has been held in high regard since ancient times. In ancient Greece, the tree was dedicated to Apollo, the God of light and was known as a symbol of peace, nobility, and victory. Laurel branches were used to make head wreaths for emperors, military generals, and poets. It is now grown commercially for its pungent leaves in Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, and Mexico. Selected cultivars include 'Aurea', with yellowish young foliage; 'Angustifolia' or 'Willow-leaf bay', with narrow lance-shaped leaves; and 'Undulata' with wavy leaf margins.

## Planting considerations and propagation techniques

Bay laurel trees are slow growing, and do well in containers or in gardens. They may be pruned to small shrubs, or grown into medium sized to tall trees. The trees can reach heights of 40 to 60 feet in the natural environment, however, they are usually smaller (10-20 feet) in garden and yard spaces. Bay laurel may also be pruned into small tree for container growing, a hedge or topiary sculpture. The trees may live up to a century. The trees can be grown in full sun or partial shade, and can tolerate strong winds. They are hardy to about 30°F, though the species can stand brief periods below freezing. The 'angustifolia' or 'willow leaf bay' cultivar (*Laurus nobilis angustifolia*) is the most cold tolerant of the cultivars. Bay laurel prefers well-drained soils, but can grow in a wide range of soil types. The flowers are dioecious (individual flowers are either male or female, and trees have either male or female flowers. Both must be grown if seed is required, however, the leaves of the tree are most often used, and these can be

harvested from male or female trees. The flowers are bee pollinated, and the tree must be cross-pollinated.

Bay laurel trees may be propagated by seed; in early fall, when the berries ripen, pick out the individual seeds from the berries and sow them directly in the ground. Seeds may take six months to one year to germinate. Seedlings may be transplanted into pots and raised in the greenhouse for the first year. Plant seedling trees into permanent positions in early summer, and provide frost protection until the trees are one to two years old. Rooted suckers may be dug up from the base of the tree and transplanted to pots or into the ground. Stem cuttings may also be propagated, but these take a long time to root. Bay laurel trees are slow growing and take many years to mature.

## **Water needs**

Bay laurel is drought tolerant, but does best with regular deep watering every other week in winter to weekly or twice a week in the heat of the summer.

## **Care**

Prune only to shape and remove dead or damaged wood. The trees may suffer cold or wind damage to the branches during winter, which can be pruned in the spring. Bay laurel is highly resistant to most pests and diseases.

## **Harvesting and processing**

Bay laurel leaves are used as a spicy, rich, aromatic flavoring for soups and stews. The leaves should be cooked in the dish for a long while to impart their full flavor. The leaf is left whole so it can be retrieved before serving the dish. Bay laurel leaves are usually harvested in summer by trimming small branches off of the tree, and then plucking the leaves from the branch. The leaves may be used fresh or dried. The leaves may be stored for one year before beginning to lose flavor. They can be brewed into an herbal tea. The dried fruit may also be used as a spice.

## **References and resources**

Floridata Plant Encyclopedia. 2005. *Laurus nobilis*. <http://floridata.com/Plants/Lauraceae/Laurus%20nobilis/733>

Missouri Botanical Garden. n.d. *Laurus nobilis*.

<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=d418>

Plants for a Future (PFAF). n.d. *Laurus nobilis* - L. <http://www.pfaf.org/user/Plant.aspx?LatinName=Laurus+nobilis>

Plants Rescue: A comprehensive Plants and Flowers Database. n.d. *Laurus nobilis*.

<http://www.plantsrescue.com/laurus-nobilis/>

U.S. National Germplasm System. *Laurus nobilis* L. <https://npgsweb.ars-grin.gov/gringlobal/taxonomydetail.aspx?21664>