

BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER

Tip of the Week

By Beverly Wickersham

“Herb of the Year: Bay Laurel”

The International Herb Association recently announced that the Herb of the Year is Bay Laurel (*Laurus nobilis*). Additional common names for this popular culinary and medicinal herb are Sweet Bay, Grecian Laurel, and Roman Laurel. The bay leaves that you may have purchased in the Spice Section of the grocery store do not come from the true bay tree. That jar is filled with the leaves of the California Bay (*Umbellularia California*). This plant is not even in the same plant family as the true Bay Laurel of Greek and Roman mythology, and for culinary purposes there is no comparison in flavor.

In Greek and Roman mythology Bay Laurel is associated with victory, strength, and protection. Apollo, the Greek God of the sun, wore a crown of bay leaves. Roman conquerors wore laurel wreaths upon returning to Rome victorious. Bay leaves were also made into wreaths and presented to illustrious poets—thus the term *Poet Laureate*.

Whole bay leaves add flavor to soups, sauces, and stews. They can be used fresh or dried. It is wise to use the whole leaf when cooking and remove it before serving the dish. The leaf has sharp edges and should not be swallowed.

The essential oil from Bay Laurel leaves have been used to treat dandruff, bronchitis, coughs, sprains, bruises, and arthritis. Bay leaves were also used in treatments for colds and influenza. Bay leaves are a natural insect deterrent. Place dried leaves in the flour bin, sugar bowl, or with any whole grains. Leaves can also be taped to the sides of kitchen cupboards, drawers, or shelves.

In the South, the plant usually grows from 6 feet to 25 feet. It tolerates pruning very well, so the plant size can be easily controlled. It likes full sun, but in hot periods will benefit from partial shade in the afternoon. Trees are hardy to about 20 degrees, or USDA Zones 8-10. These compact plants grow slowly. They can be grown potted plants and brought indoors in very cold weather. Have any questions about Central Texas gardening? Contact

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