



Laurus nobilis

Laurus nobilis is an aromatic evergreen tree or large shrub with green, glabrous leaves, in the flowering plant family *Lauraceae*. It is native to the Mediterranean region and is used as bay leaf for seasoning in cooking. Its common names include bay laurel, sweet bay, bay (esp. United Kingdom), true laurel, Grecian laurel, laurel tree or simply laurel. *Laurus nobilis* figures prominently in classical Greek, Roman, and Biblical culture.

Worldwide, many other kinds of plants in diverse families are also called "bay" or "laurel", generally due to similarity of foliage or aroma to *Laurus nobilis*, and the full name is used for the California bay laurel (*Umbellularia*), also in the family *Lauraceae*.

Description

The laurel is an evergreen shrub or small tree, variable in size and sometimes reaching 7–18 m (23–59 ft) tall. The genus *Laurus* includes four accepted species, whose diagnostic key characters often overlap.

The bay laurel is dioecious (unisexual), with male and female flowers on separate plants. Each flower is pale yellow-green, about 1 cm (0.39 in) diameter, and they are borne in pairs beside a leaf. The leaves are glabrous, 6–12 cm (2.4–4.7 in) long and 2–4 cm (0.79–1.57 in) broad, with an entire (untoothed) margin. On some leaves the margin undulates. The fruit is a small, shiny black berry-like drupe about 1 cm (0.39 in) long that contains one seed.

Ecology

Laurus nobilis is a widespread relic of the laurel forests that originally covered much of the Mediterranean Basin when the climate of the region was more humid. With the drying of the Mediterranean during the Pliocene era, the laurel forests gradually retreated, and were replaced by the more drought-tolerant sclerophyll plant communities familiar today. Most of the last remaining laurel forests around the Mediterranean are believed to have disappeared approximately ten thousand years ago, although some remnants still persist in the mountains of southern Turkey, northern Syria, southern Spain, north-central Portugal, northern Morocco, Canary Islands and in Madeira.

Human uses

Food

The plant is the source of several popular herbs and one spice used in a wide variety of recipes, particularly among Mediterranean cuisines. Most commonly, the aromatic leaves are added whole to Italian pasta sauces. They are typically removed from dishes before serving, unless used as a simple garnish. Whole bay leaves have a long shelf life of about one year, under normal temperature and humidity. Whole bay leaves are used almost exclusively as flavor agents during the food preparation stage.

Ground bay leaves, however, can be ingested safely and are often used in soups and stocks, as well as being a common addition to a Bloody Mary. Dried laurel berries and pressed leaf oil can both be used as robust spices, and the wood can be burnt for strong smoke flavoring.

Ornamental

L. nobilis is widely cultivated as an ornamental plant in regions with Mediterranean or oceanic climates, and as a house plant or greenhouse plant in colder regions. It is used in topiary to create single erect stems with ball-shaped, box-shaped or twisted crowns; also for low hedges. However it is slow-growing and may take several years to reach the desired height.

Alternative medicine

In herbal medicine, aqueous extracts of bay laurel have been used as an astringent and salve for open wounds. It is also used in massage therapy and aromatherapy. A traditional folk remedy for rashes caused by poison ivy, poison oak, and stinging nettle is a poultice soaked in boiled bay leaves.

Other uses

Laurel oil is a main ingredient, and the distinguishing characteristic of Aleppo soap.

Symbolism

Greece

Bay laurel was used to fashion the laurel wreath of ancient Greece, a symbol of highest status. A wreath of bay laurels was given as the prize at the Pythian Games because the games were in honor of Apollo, and the laurel was one of his symbols. According to the poet Lucian, the priestess of Apollo known as the Pythia reputedly chewed laurel leaves from a sacred tree growing inside the temple to induce the enthusiasmos (trance) from which she uttered the oracular prophecies which she was famous for. Some accounts starting in the fourth century BC describe her as shaking a laurel branch while delivering her prophecies.

Rome

The symbolism carried over to Roman culture, which held the laurel as a symbol of victory. It is also the source of the words baccalaureate and poet laureate, as well as the expressions "assume the laurel" and "resting on one's laurels". Ovid tells the story in the *Metamorphoses* that laurel tree was first formed when the nymph Daphne was changed into a laurel tree because of Apollo's pursuit of her. Daphne is the Greek name for the tree.

Laurel was closely associated with the Roman Emperors. The Emperors in the Julio-Claudian dynasty all sourced their Laurel wreaths from the original tree planted by Livia. It was taken as an omen of the impending end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty that in the reign of Nero the entire grove died, shortly before he was assassinated.

In modern Italy laurel wreaths are worn as a crown by graduating school students.

East Asia

An early Chinese etiological myth for the phases of the moon involved a great forest or tree which quickly grew and lost its leaves and flowers every month. After the Sui and Tang dynasties, this was sometimes connected to a woodsman named Wu Gang, sentenced to cut at a self-repairing tree as a punishment for varying offenses. The tree was originally identified as a 桂 (gui) and described in the terms of the osmanthus (*Osmanthus fragrans*, now known in Chinese as the 桂花 or "gui flower"), whose blossoms are still used to flavor wine and confections for the Mid-Autumn Festival. However, in English, it is often associated with the more well-known cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia*, now known in Chinese as the 肉桂 or "meat gui") while, in modern Chinese, it has instead become associated with the Mediterranean laurel. By the Qing dynasty, the chengyu "pluck osmanthus in the Toad Palace" (蟾宫折桂, Chángōng zhé gui) meant passing the imperial examinations, which were held around the time of the lunar festival. The similar association in Europe of laurels with victory and success led to its translation into Chinese as the 月桂 or "Moon gui".

Chemical constituents

The most abundant component found in laurel essential oil is 1,8-cineole, also called eucalyptol. The leaves contain about 1.3% essential oils (ol. lauri folii), consisting of 45% eucalyptol, 12% other terpenes, 8-12% terpinyl acetate, 3-4% sesquiterpenes, 3% methyleugenol, and other α - and β -pinenes, phellandrene, linalool, geraniol, and terpineol. It contains lauric acid also.

Both essential and fatty oils are present in the fruit. The fruit is pressed and water-extracted to obtain these products. The fruit contains up to 30% fatty oils and about 1% essential oils (terpenes, sesquiterpenes, alcohols, and ketones). The chemical compound lauroside B has been isolated from *Laurus nobilis*.