

Laurus nobilis

BAY is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to Asia Minor and Europe (particularly the Mediterranean) it has small, creamy yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Alloro* (Italian), *Bahia* (Spanish), Bay laurel, Bay leaf, Bay tree, *Bobek* (Czech), *Daphne*, *Dáphni* (Greek), *Defne yapregi* (Turkish), *Echter Lorbeer* (German), Fish tree, *Gekkeiju* (Japanese), *Gewürzlorbeer* (German), *Ghar* (Arabic), Grecian laurel, Greek bay, *Hab-el-ghar* (Hindi), Indian bay, *Küchenlorbeer* (German), *Laakerinlehti* (Hungarian), *Laakeripuu* (Finnish), *Lager* (Swedish), *Laureiro* (Portuguese), Laurel (English, Spanish), *Laurier* (Channel Islander-Guernsey, Dutch, French), *Laurier d'Apollon* (French), *Laurier commun* (French), *Laurier sauce* (French), *Lauro* (Italian, Spanish Swedish), *Lauro franco* (Italian), *Laŭro nobla* (Esperanto), *Lauro poetico* (Italian), *Lauro regio* (Italian), *Lauwerkrans* (Dutch), *Lavr* (Russian), *Llawrwydden* (Welsh), *Lorbeerbaum* (German), Lorer, *Louthi* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Noble laurel, Poet's laurel, *Rand* (Maltese), Roman laurel, Royal bay, Sweet bay, Sweet laurel, True bay, True laurel, *Vaiá* (Greek), *Vavřín ušlechtilý* (Czech), *Vavřín vznešený* (Czech, Slovak), *Vayá* (Greek), and *Yueh-kuei* (Chinese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of discipline (berry), glory (tree), 'I change only in death' (leaf), instruction (berry), nobility, perfidy, reward of merit (bay wreath), treachery, and undying affection.

Fresh leaves can be picked as needed for cooking (their flavour is far stronger when fresh than dried and should be used sparingly). Leaves are dried slowly in the dark so that they keep their colour. A greenish-yellow essential oil is extracted from the leaves and 'Laurin' is extracted from the fruit.

Warning – the leaves used in foods or the oil used in toothpastes can cause peeling and bleeding lips. Freshly picked or dried leaves should be kept out of the reach of children and pets. Leaves left in a cooked dish do not disintegrate and can be large enough to cause an obstruction in a child's throat, or if swallowed by an adult could remain whole long enough to cause an obstruction in the intestines (requiring surgical removal) as the leaves are extremely hard to digest. Even tiny fragments could be harmful and it is desirable to remove dried leaves from ingredients before liquidizing or sieving. Large doses of the leaf can cause vomiting.

Bay leaves can be confused with those of the California laurel (*Umbellularia californica*) that have a bitter fragrance and taste. In the United States the leaves of California laurel are sometimes sold as 'bay leaves'. (It should also be noted that Oil of bay is usually the essence obtained from the West Indian bay tree not from *Laurus nobilis*.)

Nobilis is Latin (known) meaning 'notable, famous or excellent'.

Its Cornish name Fish tree arose because it used to be a flavouring once used when pickling sardines or pilchards there.

Laurus nobilis means 'laurel renowned' and *laureate* means 'crowned with laurels' – thus one has 'poet laureate' and *baccalauréat*. Greek heroes and poets were crowned with laurel ie. bay leaves (as well as beech, *Fagus sylvatica*, and palm) and competitors at the Olympic Games (held at Olympia between 776 BC and 393 AD) were also crowned with it. The plant's use in this way (as a symbol of victory and fame) has persisted through the

centuries. In the Middle Ages English poets who were awarded honours were crowned with a wreath of berried laurel. This in time extended also to men of letters and the 'undergraduates' of that era (who were forbidden to marry while studying) came to be called 'bachelors' (from the Latin *baccalaureus* meaning 'laurel berry'). In turn this term eventually embraced all unmarried men. Today in the United States winners of the Boston Marathon are garlanded with bay wreaths.

The mail coaches bringing home the news of the British victory on 18th June 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo were decorated with bay leaves, and dispatches declaring victories of other battles have been wrapped in bay leaves. In triumphal homecoming processions in some European countries each soldier would carry a sprig in his hand.

The bay tree was dedicated to Apollo. Greek legend tells how Apollo fell in love with Daphne. She had vowed to remain a virgin and, when she sought protection from her father, he transformed her into a bay tree. The distraught Apollo then promised always to wear bay leaves and indicated that they should also be worn by anyone seeking his favour. The Delphic priestess to Apollo was required to eat bay leaves as part of the rituals (during which the leaves were also burnt) and their slightly narcotic effect may have contributed to the trance in which she communicated his prophecies.

The entire roof of Apollo's temple at Delphi was made of bay leaves as a protection against disease, witchcraft and lightening, and as a similar safeguard people grew bay close to their homes. If a tree withered it presaged disaster. Later these 'powerful' leaves were reproduced as garlands in architectural mouldings. Roman emperors were also known to wear a wreath of bay leaves as a protective amulet, particularly against thunderstorms. (There is a legend that before Nero's death in 68 AD all the Roman bay trees had died as a mark of respect.) In the English and Scottish highlands shepherds wore bay wreaths under their caps if they were in exceptionally exposed areas during electric storms. The strength and persistence of the faith in bay's protective powers is well illustrated if it can be believed as suggested by some records that it was used by the colourful French writer, Madame de Staël (1766-1817). Both her writings and her life seem almost to have courted controversy and danger, not least during the French Revolution when she had to make a quick departure from Paris on more than one occasion. It is claimed that she never went abroad without a bay leaf under her tongue or in her hand.

These convictions were so strong that they persisted over centuries and spread to many countries. For example in the Middle Ages bay could be found in English churches as a welcome to elves and fairies, and various customs still relied upon its efficacy as a protection against witchcraft and lightening. Because of its scent and antiseptic qualities (the latter unappreciated at the time) it was also used as a strewing herb. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in England in the last half of the 16th Century bay (instead of rushes) covered the floors of more well-to-do people.

As with so many other plants bay did not escape attention in English divination practices. It would seem that most depended upon varying rituals that led up to the enquiring maiden placing bay leaves in different positions on her pillow. This would enable her to dream of her future husband and/or be married within the year.

In the Christian calendar bay has a particular significance on Easter Sunday as it represents the Resurrection because of its vitality. (It is a plant that is able to grow from its roots even when it may appear to be dead.) In 18th Century England bay also was also part of wreaths and garlands at funerals.

Bay attracted the attention of the famous 17th Century English poet, John Milton (1608-1674) in that he referred to the
berries harsh and crude.

In contrast across the Channel two hundred years later his French peer (also a dramatist), Théodore Faullin de Banville (1823-1891), is understood to have observed

Nous n'irons plus aux bois, les lauriers sont coupés.

Far earlier in England the poet, John Gower (c.1325-1408), had also mused in his principle work the *Confessio Amantis*

This daphne into a lorer tre
Was turned, whiche is ever grene,
In token, as yet it may be sene,
That she shalle dwell a maiden stille.

While his compatriot Chaucer (c.1345-1400) wrote

Fresh grene laurer tree
That gave so passing a delicious smelle
According to the eglantere ful welle.

In the 16th Century the English poet, Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599), declaimed

The laurel meed of mightie conquerors
And poet's sage,

His famous fellow countryman of the same period, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), mentioned the laurel in three or four of his plays including in Part III of *Henry VI*

..... thou art worthy of the sway,
To whom the heavens in thy nativity
Adjung'd an olive branch, and laurel crown,
As likely to be blest in peace, and war;
And, therefore, I yield thee my free consent.

and in *Troilus and Cressida*

.....The primogenitive and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,

Bay wood has been used to make walking sticks, bowls (for food) and cabinets. It is bay (as well as box, *Buxus sempervirens*) that is often found encouraged and clipped into geometric or whimsical shapes, standing guard in pots today outside commercial establishments such as hotels, restaurants, bars, hairdressers etc.) in the West.

Although it is a flavouring in some liqueurs, its greatest use is in cookery, in both sweet and savoury dishes. (As the bay's flavour takes time to penetrate food leaves usually need to be added early on in the cooking process.) Bay is used particularly in soups, stews, bean dishes and pickles – including the French national dish *bouillabaise*.

Laurel features in many heraldic devices including the crest badges of some of the Scottish clans ie. Livingstone, MacArthur, MacLaren, Ross and Skene. Reims in France offers an example of a city coat of arms in which it is depicted in this case two branches. It makes an appearance in various national flags and crests as well, and is also represented on coinage. Laurel was depicted at least as long ago as 342 BC on Greek coins, and it also appeared on a 1619 gold coin that bore the head of James VI of Scotland and I of England (1566-1625).

Today 'Laurin', the fruit extract, is employed by the toiletry industry in toothpastes, soaps and hair products (especially for dandruff) – and the berries are an ingredient in a pharmaceutical remedy devised for treating baldness. The drinks industry uses the oil in some alcoholic drinks and bay wood is burnt to provide an aromatic smoke for processing meat and cheese.

Not only was bay dedicated to Apollo, the god of prophecy, poetry and healing, but also to his son, Asclepius (the god of medicine). For many centuries bay was used medicinally, particularly as a remedy for plague and other infectious diseases as it was considered to be an extremely powerful antiseptic. It was also held to be an antidote for both snake bites and stings, and the berries were not only used for abortion but seven of them were

prescribed to ensure the quick birth of a baby. The oil has been used externally to treat rheumatism and gout. Today although it is rarely employed in Western medicine it is found in veterinary medicine particularly in stimulant liniments. The Lebanese however do prescribe a concoction that is made by steeping leaves and berries in brandy for stomach complaints.

It is the birthday flower for 14th July.