

Prunus laurocerasus

[Synonyms : *Cerasus laurocerasus*, *Laurocerasus officinalis*, *Padus laurocerasus*]

CHERRY LAUREL is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to south-western Asia and south-eastern Europe it has tiny dull-white flowers.

It is also known as Bay laurel, *Bobkotřešeň lékařská* (Czech), *Bobkovišeň lékařská* (Czech), Cherry bay, Common cherry laurel, Common laurel, English laurel, *Kirschlorbeer* (German), *Laakerikirsikka* (Finnish), *Lagerhägg* (Swedish), Laurel, *Laurbaerkirsebaer* (Danish), *Laurel cerezo* (Spanish), Laurel cherry, *Laurier-armande* (French), *Laurier aux crèmes* (French), *Laurier-cérise* (French), *Laurierkers* (Dutch), *Lauroceraso* (Italian, Spanish), *Lauro regio* (Italian), *Laurowisnia wschodnia* (Polish), *Lavrbaer-Kirsebaer* (Danish), *Llawr-sirianen* (Welsh), *Lorbeerkirsche* (German), *Louothie d'Espangne* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Loureiro cereja* (Portuguese), *Loureiro cerejeira* (Portuguese), *Louro cerejo* (Portuguese), *Louro Inglês* (Portuguese), *Vavrínovec lekársky* (Slovak), and Versailles laurel; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of perfidy (flowering).

Warning – the whole plant is extremely poisonous (especially the leaves and the kernels) – even small quantities can cause death. It can cause vomiting, faintness, rapid breathing, headache, coma and death. Internal use must only be prescribed by a qualified practitioner. It can be poisonous for animals which normally avoid it.

It is pollinated by flies and beetles.

Cherry laurel's leaves have been confused with those of bay (*Laurus nobilis*).

This species can be extremely invasive when introduced outside its native habitat.

Laurocerasus is derived from the genus name *Laurus* and *cerasus* (Latin for cherry or cherry-tree) components meaning 'cherry laurel' – and, before it was absorbed into the *Prunus* genus, was also the name of a past genus *Laurocerasus*.

Introduced to Europe in the mid-16th Century this very poisonous plant has never achieved any medicinal significance despite attempts made to obtain its recognition as a sedative by both the Spanish and Swiss. Although there is still some debate many authorities suspect that the then Countess of Arundel introduced cherry laurel to Britain in 1614 following a visit to Italy. Apparently it must have arrived in the Islands before 1633 as records for that year note its popularity in English gardens.

In 1731 some Irish cooks mistook it for bitter almond (*Prunus dulcis* var. *amara*) with fatal consequences. Despite their known poisonous qualities the red turning to black berries have been used in Continental Europe (and in Britain when the plant first arrived there) to flavour creams and puddings and 19th Century records report several deaths in Italy from people eating these dishes. Amazingly cherry laurel was also used as a brandy flavouring. It is also surprising to note from various records that occasionally butchers and greengrocers have used it in the past as a festive decoration at Christmas time. An extract was the murder weapon in a famous case in 1780. Sir Theodosius Broughton met his death at the ministrations of his brother-in-law, a Captain Donaldson – for which the latter was executed. Recognition of the lethal nature of the plant gradually spread and by 1838 it is hardly surprising to learn that its bitter almond odour featured in many a detective novel.

In Britain today if mango leaves (*Mangifera indica*) are unobtainable cherry laurel leaves are used as an alternative during Hindu festivals. These are hung (from string) over the doorways of houses where a marriage ceremony is being performed or where a son is born.

Today as when it first arrived in Europe cherry laurel is popular as an ornamental plant, particularly for hedging.

It seems that these leaves have slowly superseded the bay leaves traditional in European mourning wreaths since classical times. Even in modern times a (cherry) laurel wreath is placed on the quarter-deck of HMS *Victory* (now in Portsmouth Harbour) on 21st October annually. This is the anniversary of the death of Admiral Lord Nelson (1758-1805) at the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar. A similar tribute is paid annually to Sir Henry Wood (1869-1944) in front of what is now (through radio and television) an international audience when a wreath is draped ceremonially on his bust. This occurs in September at London's Royal Albert Hall at the Last Night of the Proms. The famous English conductor was a founder of the popular BBC Promenade Concerts.

Crushed the leaves have been employed as insecticide, especially by entomologists and butterfly collectors.

Medicinally, herbalists have used the leaves for remedies to treat whooping-cough, asthma, indigestion, persistent insomnia and ringworm.