

Umbellularia californica

[Synonyms : *Oreodaphne californica*, *Umbellularia californica* var. *fresnensis*]

CALIFORNIA LAUREL is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to western North America (particularly California in the United States) it has small yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as American bay, Balm-of-heaven, Bay, Bay laurel, Bay tree, Black laurel, Black myrtle, Cajeput, Cajeput-tree, California bay, California bay tree, Californian laurel, Californian olive, California olive, California sassafras, Headache tree, Laurel, Mountain hemlock, Mountain laurel, Myrtle, Myrtle tree, Myrtly, Oregon mirt, Oregon myrtle, Oreodaphne, Pacific myrtle, Peppermintwood, Pepperwood, Spice tree, White laurel, White myrtle, Yellow laurel, and Yellow myrtle.

Warning – the pungent fragrance from crushed leaves or bark (or the oil from them) can cause headaches and sneezing.

The leaves of the California laurel can be confused with those of bay (*Laurus nobilis*).

Californica means ‘of or from California (United States)’.

California laurel featured in the ceremonial rituals of some of the North American Pomo Indians and also that of the Karok tribe. The latter burnt the branches during the Brush Dance to repel evil spirits. It was also the subject of superstition in that both the Yurok and some of the Pomo Indian tribe suspended leafy branches in their homes to provide protection from any evil that might approach.

In contrast Costanoan Indians hung bunches of leaves as an air freshener – and for several tribes including the Yurok, Mendocino Indian, Costanoan and Yuki the leafy branches or smoke from burning leaves acted as an insecticide which would get rid of fleas.

Costanoan hunters used burning leaf smoke to eject ground squirrels from their burrows, and hunters from some of the Pomo tribe rubbed the leaves on their bodies to remove the human smell before following their prey.

Root bark was used by Concow Indians to make a beverage, and Yurok, some of the Pomo tribe and the Costanoan Indians all ate the dark purple fruit. The Pomo tribe ate the fruit raw or sun-dried, while the Costanoans preferred to eat them raw or boiled. The nuts seem to have been particularly popular according to records. They were eaten roasted by the Tolowa, Yuki, Karok and Yurok tribes, some of the Pomo Indians enjoyed them roasted on their own or with vegetables and meal, and the Costanoan tribe ate them in roasted, dried or ground cakes.

The plant was a source of medicine for quite a few North American Indian tribes including the Yurok. It provided a disinfectant for the Karok Indians, and it offered a stimulant for the Mendocino Indian tribe. While some of the Pomo Indians treated period problems with it, the Karok tribe used it for childbirth matters. Stomach upsets were treated with it by the Mendocino Indian tribe, it was used to treat some lung problems by some of the Pomo Indians (who also used it for colds and sore throats) and several tribes including the Pomo, Yuki and Mendocino Indian employed it as a treatment for rheumatism. Headaches were cured in various ways with it by the Miwok, Mendocino Indian, Yuki and Cahuilla Indians, and both the Karok tribe and some of the Pomo applied it to skin disorders.

In the United States its leaves are sometimes sold as 'bay leaves' (*Laurus nobilis*), although their taste and fragrance is stronger and for some more bitter.
This tree is admired today primarily for its hard, yellowish-brown wood which is prized for cabinetwork.