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How to Grow a Bay Laurel Tree (Bay Leaf)



Gorgeous leathery leaves from the Bay Laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) herb plant.

Photo Credit: Danny Hummel

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Planting, Growing, and Caring for Bay Laurel Plants

By [Samantha Johnson](#)

Last Updated: April 10, 2025



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With its gorgeous leathery leaves, bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) is an evergreen tree or shrub most often grown as an ornamental container plant. And, yes, it's the *same* plant that produces the bay leaf, an aromatic herb used in cooking!

Learn how to grow bay laurel in our gardener's guide.

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About Bay Laurel

Laurus nobilis is a half-hardy perennial that grows into a sizable tree in its native Mediterranean climate (up to 60 feet tall!), but it's only hardy in USDA Zones 8 and up. It's often grown in a container in Zones 7 and down. Its slow growth means it can stay in a pot as a patio or houseplant for decades. It needs to be brought indoors in the winter.

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Although this plant family (Lauraceae) is fairly small, it provides some of the most beautiful and fragrant herbs. If you cook often, I'm sure you'll find that at least one of every ten recipes for soups, stews, and baked dishes calls for a bay leaf. Bay leaves provide a deep flavor in dishes that can't be found in other herbs. It's one of a kind.



Bay laurel is an excellent choice for container gardeners. Its slow growth pattern makes it well-suited to life indoors. Credit: izzzy71

Regular pruning and shaping are necessary to keep your bay laurel manageable, especially if it is grown in a container. If outside, bay laurels can be pruned into a pretty topiary, planted as a privacy hedge, or grown as a small tree in an herb garden. Its evergreen leaves and dark bark make it attractive in winter and shade gardens.

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Bay laurel trees are *dioecious*, meaning some are male and some are female. Each produces blossoms, but it's necessary to have both male and female trees available for pollination to produce small berries. The berries aren't used for culinary purposes.

Songbirds are attracted to bay laurel for both the berries and shelter, thanks to its thick canopy. However, it's toxic to dogs, cats, and horses. It is not poisonous to humans.

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PLANTING

Generally speaking, there are two ways to plant bay laurel—either as a cutting, or by purchasing a young potted tree. Either way, planting is a fairly simple process, though if you'd like to enjoy your fresh bay leaves sooner, you might favor the potted route to get a jump start on growth.

When to Plant

- Plant Bay Laurel in early spring, just before the growing season gears up and while your young tree is still dormant.
- If planting cuttings in a container indoors, any time of the year is fine, but you may have the best luck in the summer when the shoots are actively growing.

How to Plant

If you're planting a young bay laurel potted tree that you've purchased from a retailer, the process is typical of most trees.

- Dig a hole twice the size of the young tree's pot—this will help ensure that the soil is soft enough for the tree to spread its roots out.

- Plant outdoors in full sun except in very warm locations where some afternoon shade is helpful.
- It's also possible to propagate bay laurel with a method called *air layering* but this is more complicated. The Iowa State University Extension [explains the basics here](#).

While growing bay laurel from seeds is possible, but this isn't recommended. The seeds take a long time to germinate, and the success rate isn't very high. Instead, [cuttings are typically preferred](#). To do this:

- Snip 6-inch shoots of young new growth (nothing overly woody) from a mature bay laurel. "Leave the leaves!" on your cuttings.
- Add a dash of rooting hormone to the cut end of each cutting.
- Then, plant the cuttings in soft potting soil, perhaps mixed with sand. With luck, you'll grow at least one new bay laurel, but remember that growing from cuttings is a slow process.

GROWING

Bay laurel isn't difficult to grow, but it grows slowly. If you think of mint and chives as the sprinters of the herb world, then think of your bay leaves as the marathon runner.

- Because of bay laurel's temperate Mediterranean upbringing, it's not very cold hardy, and requires the climate of Zones 8 and up in order to survive outdoors in the ground.
- Happily, bay laurel thrives in containers, so you can grow it in cooler regions as long as you bring it indoors during cold weather. You can keep it indoors all year round, or you can acclimate it to life outdoors during the warmer summer months, then bring it back indoors for winter.
- If grown indoors, you'll want a full sun location (or access to many [12+] hours of artificial light each day).
- Outdoors, bay trees can reach 40 feet tall, but in a container they're typically pruned into a shrub shape only a few feet high to keep them manageable. It's best to do this when the tree isn't in its most active period of growth.
- Bay laurel isn't terribly picky about the pH of the soil, but ideally the soil should be slightly acidic.
- Bay laurel likes well-draining soil—it can even be somewhat sandy. The soil type doesn't matter as much as the water content of the soil. Ideally, it needs that perfect balance of soil that's well-draining yet kept regularly watered and lightly moist, but don't worry—that's achievable!

- Water thoroughly when the soil around your bay laurel is dry about an inch or two down.
- Bay trees planted in the ground likely won't need much in the way of fertilizing, but those in containers can definitely use some periodic feeding.
- If grown as a tree and left on its own without pruning, a bay laurel tree could reach upwards of 20 (or even 40!) feet tall. It's important to keep it pruned annually.

Types

To grow for culinary use, you want the straight species, *Laurus nobilis*. There are some cultivars but those were developed with more of an emphasis on appearance.

HARVESTING

Your bay laurel looks terrific in a container as a small shrub or in the ground as a larger tree, but let's face it—you're probably growing it for the leaves so that you can harvest them and put them to use in your next cooking adventure. It's super easy to harvest and use bay leaves.

Remember: the leaves are used for flavoring, not for eating. You'll add the leaves during the cooking process to allow them to impart their flavor, but then remove the leaves prior to eating the dish.

- Once your bay tree is at least 2 years old, you can begin harvesting the leaves for culinary purposes.
- Picking bay leaves during the summer can produce maximized flavor, but the University of California notes they can be harvested year-round.
- Harvest mature bay leaves that are a vivid dark green—not small young leaves. Larger leaves have more flavor.
- Using your homegrown leaves ensures freshness that packs the best taste.
- Many people find that bay leaves add a delightful—though subtle—herbal flavor to dishes. It's been described as herby, floral, clove-like, eucalyptus-like, and smoky!
- Many cooks place whole dried bay leaves right into their soups, stews, pastas, or other slow-cooking dishes, allowing the flavors to seep in slowly. The whole leaves are removed before serving since they won't soften enough during cooking to be palatable.
- Bay leaves taste more pungent when fresh and sweeter when dried. Often dried grocery store bay leaves have lost their flavor if kept too long; try drying your own!
- Bay laurel is also used to add flavor to pickles.
- For an extra flavor punch, some cooks prefer ground bay leaves. If you grind your own, they must be ground to an extremely fine

powder—small pieces of bay leaf can be very sharp and gritty.



Fresh bay leaves are more pungent than dried, imparting savory flavor into a variety of dishes. Credit: Formatorigi

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PESTS/DISEASES

A variety of pests and diseases can bother bay laurel, including:

- Scales
- Thrips

- Psyllids
- Laurel wilt
- Root rot
- Phytophythoud
- Sooty mold

WIT AND WISDOM

- *Laurus nobilis* goes by many common names, including bay laurel, bay tree, Grecian laurel, true laurel, and tree laurel. Many types of laurel are toxic and may be called by similar common names like “bay,” so it can be confusing. If you’re growing the plant to cook with the leaves, make absolutely sure it is *Laurus nobilis*.
- Bay leaves were seen as a symbol of victory and were fashioned into the famous laurel crowns given to ancient Olympic champions at sporting events. It was also used in ancient Rome to make garlands for the December festival to honor the god Saturn, Saturnalia.
- Laurels are still associated with achievements, as in poet laureate.
- In this same sense, the phrase *resting on your laurels* means that you’re so busy reliving old achievements you miss out on the present.
- The tree makes tonewood for guitars, violins, and other stringed instruments.

- Other Lauraceae family members include culinary favorites such as cinnamon and avocados.
- Historically, bay leaves were believed to protect against lightning strikes. In ancient Roman folklore, a suddenly withered bay laurel signifies coming disaster.
- Bay laurel oils are used in massage therapy.
- Bay laurel has a long history as a medicinal herb, especially in ancient Greece and Rome. Today, it's most often been used as digestive aide; bay leaf tea helps ease bouts of upset stomach. Bay leaf is a good source of vitamin A, vitamin B6, and vitamin C, which all support a healthy immune system.

COOKING NOTES

Bay leaves have a sweet and heady aroma. They add a savory flavor with a spicy nutmeg note and taste more pungent when used fresh.

The leaves are typical in French, Italian, Spanish, and Creole dishes, especially sauces, soups, and meats. They're common in Bouquet Garni (a tied bundle of culinary herbs used for cooking).

HERBS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Samantha Johnson is an award-winning author and gardening expert with over 20 years of experience cultivating heirloom vegetables and sharing her passion for rural living. [Read More from Samantha Johnson](#)

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Bay is use in Indian cooking too. It's a one spice of
Garam Masala (a mix of almost ten spices)

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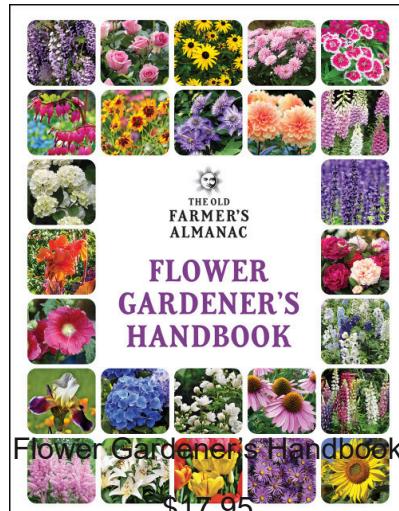
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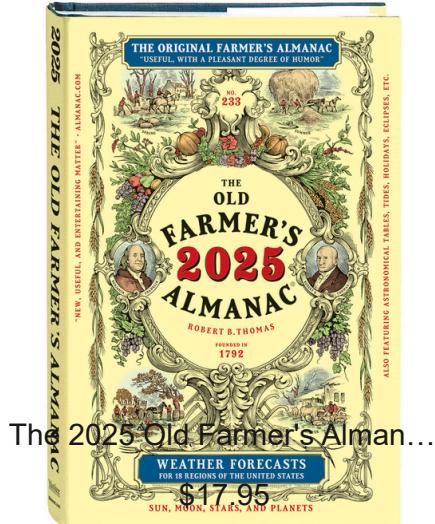
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