

The Story of Plants: BAY LAUREL

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ILLUSTRATION BY SYLVIA PORTILLO

CULTIVATING FRIENDSHIP WAS Epicurus's primary mode of teaching. He called his philosophy school in ancient Greece "The Garden." He taught that all you needed to know about life can be learned from gardening, cooking, and sharing meals with friends. His brave beliefs were frowned upon by the high-minded Greeks. Yet he had a large following and was, no doubt, crowned with laurels, the ancient Greek way to honor poets, athletes, and rulers.

I am not speaking of cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*), common here, but bay laurel, or bay (*Laurus nobilis*). This aromatic tree, which can reach 35 feet, is not native to Greece. It is an archaeophyte, a plant introduced in ancient times which has naturalized into a region. It is probably native to Asia Minor. Long before Epicurus began his garden school, laurel was being used in cooking, medicine, and for starting fires. Sacred to the sun god Apollo and the fire sign Leo, it has long been attributed with bringing light. At Delphi, priestesses were inhaling the smoke of burning bay wood to inspire their divinations. Strangely, centuries later a tea of bay leaves was prescribed to calm hysterics and branches were hung to repel witches.

To most of us bay, suitable for topiary and hedges, is a kitchen herb; it has lost any magical qualities. Yet, I still maintain my family's belief that he who gets the bay leaf in his soup bowl will have good luck. Maybe good health, too. That this integral component in *bouquet garni* aids in digestion is probably why it ended up in so many pots. I love the deliciously camphorous flavor it imparts. The other species in genus Azores bay (*L. azorica*)—possibly two species—comes from the warm islands of the eastern Atlantic. Grown throughout the tropical world, it is used extensively in cooking and medicine too.

The bays share their aromatic trait with many members of the laurel family, Lauraceae. This family of primarily evergreen trees and shrubs from the tropics and sub-tropics worldwide has 57 genera and close to 2,500 species according to the USDA. Much research is being performed on the useful oils of many members of the laurel family. Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*)



which flavors everything from curries to cookies is said to be loaded with health benefits. So is the delectable avocado (*Persea americana*) touted as the world's healthiest fruit.

Even Japanese spicebush (*Lindera obtusiloba*) and sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), both temperate garden favorites,

are rich in fragrant healing oils long in use. So is the only member of the laurel family native to the West Coast, the monotypic California bay (*Umbellularia californica*).

I grow a California bay in a pot. I left it and my true bay out during the cold snap of 2009. The California bay didn't drop a leaf while my true bay died. But I find California bay (one of its common names is headache tree) a little too aromatic for cooking. So I am trying a hardier narrow leafed form of true bay (*L. nobilis* f. *angustifolia*) this winter.

Though the bay has naturalized in river valleys of the Mediterranean I planted my new bay in a russet pot the color of Grecian

soil to ensure good drainage. My dear friend, the brave gardener Jon Dove, planted a laurel hedge in the Duwamish Valley 15 years ago. It has proven to be a tough, solid hedge in his deep alluvial soil, withstanding the reflected heat of his black-topped alley, as well as many harsh winters.

As the year winds down, I find myself gardening less and making more soups and fires for friends who bring light to this dark time.

As Epicurus said, "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, for the greatest is the possession of friendship."

And I might add the wisdom to bring the bay laurel in from the cold. ❄️

Read more of Daniel's thoughts on plants and gardening on his blog www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com.

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