

SWEET BAY

Laurus nobilis

Sweet bay has a long history of symbolic, as well as culinary and medicinal use. The Mediterranean native symbolizes good fortune, protection against evil, peace and victory — manifested in the laurel wreath presented to victors of the ancient Olympics. Medieval academics were crowned with wreaths of laurel berries or *bacca laurea*, from which we get the terms “*baccalaureate*” and “*Bachelor (degree)*.”

Sweet bay starts slowly, showing little top growth the first year while the roots develop. It then grows rapidly to a large evergreen shrub or small tree up to 10 feet high and 8 feet wide (although usually pruned much lower), with attractive, dark green, leathery leaves. Clusters of yellow-green flowers are followed by small black berries. Mature plants can reach 40 feet high by 20 feet wide.

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CULTURE: The best site is one with full sun and average to dry, well-drained soil. They are cold hardy to Zone 8, 10°-20°F. Sweet bay does great in a large container, where it can be pruned to a manageable size and overwintered in a protected spot. If planted in the ground, choose a sunny site protected from winds and frost. Young plants can be cold sensitive until established. Mulch in the fall with coarse bark or evergreen boughs. Fertilize monthly during the growing season with an All Purpose Organic Fertilizer or fish fertilizer. Watch for scale insects and dab any you see with alcohol swabs.

GARDEN USES: Good as an accent plant, screen or background. Useful as clipped topiary.

KITCHEN USES: Pick the leaves at any time and store them in the dark — the drier the leaves, the stronger the flavor — for up to a year. Use in bouquet garni (a French herb combination) for soups, stews and sauces. Excellent added to marinades or liquids for poaching fish. Meat, shellfish, poultry, game, gravy, stuffing and patés can all be embellished by sweet bay. Rubbing the leaf with a spoon before cooking will stimulate its flavor. Remove the leaf before serving.

Bay wood can be chopped into chips, soaked in water and used for aromatic smoke on the grill. The bark can be ground into spice for biscuits. Bay leaf wreaths and swags look good on walls or doors any time of year. And just in case you have any Olympic champions in your household...