



Bay laurel, also known as a sweet bay laurel.
Photo: Twinning Valley Nurseries [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/)

The Bay Laurel Tree... It's Worth Replanting!

By Mary Cennamo,
Bexar County Master Gardener

The bay laurel tree, *Laurus nobilis*, is an evergreen herbal tree whose aromatic leaves are used as a culinary herb (bay leaf). It was named the Herb of the Year

in 2009 by the International Herb Association.

While the sweet bay tree can reach 50 feet tall in its arid native Mediterranean region, its slow-growing, shallow-rooted nature makes it suitable for container growing here in the Bexar County area. I personally had my tree for six years. I repotted it several times and it had tripled its height to 6 feet in that time.

Container growing, using a well-drained potting soil, is highly recommended because the bay laurel can be sensitive to our occasional freezes. By growing it in a container, you can move it inside or take steps to provide it with additional winter protection. I grew mine in a container placed on the south side of my home. I only had to give it a light pruning each spring, to remove an occasional dead or damaged branch.

Grow the bay laurel tree in a location where it can receive at least six hours of sunlight. It will benefit from a little protection from our hot afternoon sun.

Do not overwater it. Just keep the soil barely moist. It will use much less water in the cooler temperatures of the winter and more during the hot summer. It does not tolerate saturated or standing water, so if you are using a saucer to protect your patio or deck, dump the excess water out after a heavy rain.

Fertilize bay trees once in the spring with a liquid all-purpose fertilizer. Apply a thin layer of compost in the spring. Provide a mulch (shredded oak leaves, double-shredded bark mulch, etc.) to keep moisture in and to lower the temperature of the soil.

You can propagate this evergreen tree from newer stems taken in the late summer. Take a 6-inch cutting, using a slant cut on the bottom, with pruners. Remove the leaves from the bottom 2-3 inches of the cutting. Cut off a third of each of the remaining leaves to reduce their size. Dip the cutting into root stimulator powder and then place it into a propagating medium. I always sterilize my pruners with alcohol wipes before cutting to eliminate any bacterial and fungal contamination which can kill the seedlings. Some people also tent their cuttings with plastic to retain the humidity, so the soil doesn't dry out. Keep the soil moist but not wet. It will take several weeks for the cuttings to root.

While bay laurels can handle temperatures that dip down into the teens, they cannot handle extended freezes like the one we experienced this last February. Since mine did not survive that freeze, I will be replacing it when I can find another in the nursery. It is well worth the effort!

The dry, fresh, or ground leaves of the bay laurel tree can be used for cooking in soups, stews and teas, to add a unique aromatic flavor. It has health benefits, as well. Bay leaves add vitamin A, C, potassium, magnesium, iron, calcium, and antioxidants.

Many chefs recommend that you keep this herb in the freezer instead of on your spice rack in your lighted kitchen. If kept in the freezer, the bay leaves will keep their flavor longer since the dried leaves slowly lose their flavor after 6 months on the shelf.

I love the fact that I can go outside and pick a couple of leaves and put them in my stew or soup. Fresh as well as dried bay leaves are very expensive, and I use them all the time. My mother cooked with the dried bay leaf. I prefer the fresh herb because it gives a stronger flavor! I have included a stew recipe, of course. Please remember to take the bay leaves out of the stew before you serve it.

Bon Appetit!

Beef Stew

1 (14 oz.) can diced tomatoes with basil and garlic
1 bag of frozen carrots, waffle cut
6 cups cubed potatoes, red or Yukon (6 potatoes)
1 onion, diced
2 pounds stew meat
2 fresh bay leaves
2 twigs of fresh thyme
1 6 inch branch of fresh rosemary
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
Garlic, salt, and pepper to taste.
3 cups beef broth or beer of choice or 1 ½ cups of each
1 cup frozen peas
1/4 cup flour (optional)

Brown the stew meat on all sides on medium heat with 1 T olive oil. Add all the ingredients except for the peas and flour to a 6-quart crock pot in the order listed and cook on low for 7-8 hours or on high for 4 hours. Add the peas for the last 10 minutes of cooking. Make sure to remove the bay leaves at the end of cooking and before eating. If you wish to thicken the stew broth, you can use 1/4 c flour and gradually add 1/2 c stew broth to that. Use a whisk to smooth this flour mixture and then stir this flour slurry into the stew and cook for an additional 30 minutes on high till the gravy thickens. If you prefer a thinner broth or beef soup, leave the flour out.