

Bay Leaf and its Use

Written by W.J.Pais

Bay leaves refer to the aromatic leaf of the bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*, Lauraceae). Fresh or dried bay leaves are used in cooking for their distinctive flavor and fragrance.

The term "bay leaf" is used to refer to several other plants besides the leaves of *L. nobilis*. These include:

California bay leaf - **Indian bay leaf or Malabathrum (*Cinnamomum tejpata*; also *tej pat*, *tejpat*, *tejpata*)** has a fragrance and taste similar to cinnamon (cassia) bark, but milder. In culinary terms, it is misleading to call it bay leaf because it is of a genus other than that of the bay laurel tree, it does not taste the same as the bay laurel leaf,

Taste and aroma

If eaten whole, bay leaves are pungent and have a sharp, bitter taste. As with many spices and flavorings, the fragrance of the bay leaf is more noticeable than its taste. When dried, the fragrance is herbal, slightly floral, and somewhat similar to oregano and thyme.

Uses

Bay leaves are a fixture in the cooking of many European cuisines. The leaves are most often used whole.

In Indian cuisine, bay leaves are often used in biryani and other rich, spicy dishes and as an ingredient in garam masala.

Crushed bay leaves impart more fragrance than whole leaves.

Bay leaves can also be scattered in a pantry to repel meal moths, flies, roaches, and silverfish.

They have many properties that make them useful for treating high blood sugar, migraine headaches, bacterial and fungal infections, and gastric ulcers. Bay leaves and berries have been used for their astringent, carminative, diaphoretic, digestive, diuretic, emetic and stomachic properties. Bay oil, or oil of bays (*oleum lauri*) is used in liniments for bruises and sprains. Bay leaf has been used as an herbal remedy for headaches. It contains compounds, called parthenolides, which have proven useful in the treatment of migraines. Bay leaf has also been shown to help the body process insulin more efficiently, which leads to lower blood sugar levels, and to reduce the effects of stomach ulcers. Bay leaf contains eugenol, which has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Bay leaf is also an antifungal and antibacterial, and has also been used to treat rheumatism, amenorrhea, and colic.

Safety

Bay leaves may be eaten without toxic effect. However, they remain very stiff even after thorough cooking, and if swallowed whole or in large pieces, they may pose a risk of scratching

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the digestive tract or even causing choking. Thus, most recipes that use bay leaves will recommend their removal after the cooking process has finished.

Cultivation

Gardeners in frost-free or light frost areas will find that bay laurel seedlings planted in the ground easily grow into large trees but when kept pruned, it can thrive as a small bush. Bay laurel can also be grown in containers, the size of which limits the ultimate size of the trees. New plants are often started via layering, or from cuttings, since growing from seed can be difficult.