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Bay leaf: An old leaf for the new year

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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James Simon, a Rutgers professor who directs the university's New Use Agriculture and Natural Plant Products Program, has made the study of herbs his life's work. But there's one herb that presently has nothing to do with his research but is, nonetheless, always at hand in his Princeton kitchen. It is bay leaf, which he uses to flavor his soups, Moroccan-style dishes, and stews, and which the International Herb Society has designated "herb of the year" for 2009.

"Ninety percent or more of the bay leaf comes from the steep hills of Turkey. They manually pick the leaves and dry them to 10 percent of their moisture on drying racks out of the sun so they retain their green color," said Simon. "It makes a beautiful ornamental plant. You can grow it on your

porch and bring it inside. You can use the leaves fresh."

A member of the laurel family, the European bay leaf--also known as Turkish or sweet bay (*Laurus nobilis*)--is native to Asia Minor, and its cultivation spread throughout the Mediterranean in ancient times. (Darker and more slender, the bay leaves cultivated in California and popularly sold in wreaths are a laurel relation, *Umbellularia californica*.) Greek myth tells of how Gaea, the earth goddess, transformed the nymph Daphne into a laurel tree to help her escape the unwanted advances of Apollo. The classic tradition of crowning poets and scholars with laurel wreaths gave us the terms "poet

laureate" and "baccalaureate." Victorious Roman soldiers and Greek Olympians, likewise, were honored with laurel crowns.

Over time, more practical uses were found for the aromatic leaves. They were added to flour and grain to discourage pantry moths, and used as folk remedies for the treatment of migraines, stomach discomfort, bacterial and fungal infections, and high blood sugar. But it is in cooking that the bay's heady fragrance is put to best effect.

"In any kind of stew it adds a background flavor," said Louis Hyde of Well-Sweep Herb Farm in Port Murray, who sells bay plants and will be highlighting the culinary and medicinal uses of the herb during this year's edition of her annual Midsummer Herb Festival in July. "Most any herb would complement it, but it's a strong herb, so you have to be careful not to use a tremendous amount of it. For a pot of stew, just two to three leaves."

"The beauty of cooking with bay is that it releases its flavor slowly, so that it is an essential herb for slow, long cooking techniques," wrote Pat Crocker, a culinary herbalist, who contributed to the Herb Society of America's guide to bay.

One of the trio of herbs that compose a traditional bouquet garni--that bundle of fresh earthy fragrance tossed into many a soup and stew--bay also lends its characteristic pungency to the classic bechamel sauce. "Garnishing cooked or cold-pressed pÃ¢te or terrines with a leaf or two infuses the spicy essence of the Mediterranean, its native homeland," noted Crocker, "and it is positively brilliant in baked beans and lentil dishes." The complexity of slow-cooked desserts, such as puddings, custards, and poached fruit also can be enhanced by bay.

The heat in the cooking process "breaks up the glands in the leaf that contain the oils," explained Simon. "By the time you've finished cooking, all the essential oils have been eluded out of the leaf." Contrary to popular belief, the leathery result is not toxic, but still shouldn't be eaten. "It just tastes really bad. It tastes like you're chewing on a tree branch," said Simon. Moreover, the serrated edge of the leaf makes it a choking hazard, noted Hyde. "After you finish cooking with it, just take it out so no one ends up chewing on it," advised Simon. Fresh bay leaves, which need to be rubbed or crushed to release their aromatic compounds, noted Crocker, "store best if wrapped in a moistened tea towel and placed in a sealed plastic bag on the door of the refrigerator." Whole dried bay leaves can be kept in an airtight container in a cool dark place for up to a year -- just about when it will be time for bay to yield the spotlight to another fragrant herb.

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