



## Meet the Saratoga Bay Laurel Tree

by Cathy Ronk, UC Master Gardener

### Name:

The Saratoga Bay Laurel tree is a tasteful tree—to the eye, nose, and mouth! An aromatic evergreen grown as a large shrub or small tree, *Laurus nobilis* ‘Saratoga’ can be a great addition to most gardens. It is a hybrid between *Laurus nobilis* and *Laurus azorica*. None of these laurels are of the same genus as the California native bay laurel (*Umbellularia californica*), but they all belong to the same family, *Lauraceae*. All have savory leaves used in cooking, although the flavors differ slightly.

### Interesting Facts:

- *Laurus nobilis* is native to the Mediterranean, found in Greek, Roman, and Biblical writings. *Laurus* is Latin for “victory, triumph, success” and is the root of such words as baccalaureate, poet laureate and used in phrases like “resting on one’s laurels.” In Latin *nobilis* means “noble, famous, and excellent.” Ancient Greeks wove *L. nobilis* branches into wreaths to crown their victorious heroes.
- Common names for *L. nobilis* include: Grecian Laurel, Bay Laurel, Bay Tree, Mediterranean Sweet Bay, True Laurel, Laurel Tree, or Sweet Bay.
- The date of the regular Bay Laurel’s introduction to the British Isles from the Mediterranean is unknown, but it is mentioned in Turner’s *Herbal* in 1562. It was strewn on the floors of houses of distinguished persons in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Early colonists carried the Bay Laurel to North America.
- Mr. Frank Serpa of Fremont, California developed the ‘Saratoga’ hybrid in the 1950’s.
- This ‘Saratoga’ hybrid is on the list of approved street trees of many local cities. Several were recently planted in the city of Woodlake as a part of its Valencia Boulevard renovation.



### Description:

Saratoga Bay Laurel is a compact, upright growing large shrub or small tree maturing to 25 feet tall and wide. Production nurseries grow the ‘Saratoga’ in three forms: shrub, multi-trunked tree, and standard (single main trunk). Its growth habit is a bit more open than its parent, *L. nobilis*.

It is evergreen, meaning its leaves remain green all year long. The leathery, round to oval shape leaves are 5 - 6 inches long and are olive green in color with lighter undersides. The new, young leaves and leaf stems are tinged red. When crushed, the stems and leaves of this hybrid are strongly aromatic with the typical scent of bay, and can be used for culinary purposes.

In late winter or early spring 'Saratoga' produces an abundant display of small, pale yellow flower clusters. These male flowers do not produce unwanted fruits like other laurels do.

**Care:**

Plant this tree in fall through spring in full sun or light afternoon shade. It is quite tolerant of most soils and conditions, if given good drainage. Fertilizer is usually unnecessary. Once this tree is established, it is very drought tolerant.

The Water Use Classification of Landscape Species (WUCOLS IV) rates the 'Saratoga' as a "low water use" tree or shrub. The WUCOLS project was initiated and funded by the Water Use Efficiency Office of the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). Work was directed by the University of California Cooperative Extension. WUCOLS IV provides evaluations of the irrigation needs of over 3,500 plant groups used in California Landscapes at [www.ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS](http://www.ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS).

The shrub form makes a lovely, dense hedge, especially when closely sheared. Prune in winter to shear, to train into specific shapes (topiary), or to gently shape in a more natural form.

'Saratoga' is resistant to laurel psyllid and soft shell scale, two insects that plague its parent plant.

**Design:**

This plant is an excellent choice for Mediterranean-style gardens--used as a shrub, tree, or planted in terra cotta pots. For a formal look, plant in matched pairs. 'Saratoga' fits well in most small gardens, patios, and courtyards. It is very suitable as a container plant.

Olive, pomegranate, lavender, rosemary, salvias, rockrose, artemisia, santolina, and thyme are good companion plants. 'Saratoga' can also work well with low-water California native plants.

Bay leaves add flavor to sauces, soups, stews, meats, fish, and pickles. They are stronger fresh than when used dry. Simply pick the leaf, rinse it off, and add to your cooking dish.

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