

עלי דפנה – Bay leaf – Bay laurel (*Laurus Nobilis*, Lauraceae)

Noble, Verdant Bay leaf Tree

Dafna or Daphna is a well-known Hebrew girl's-name, although it is less popular in the USA and Europe. Several favorite people in my life carry this name. They are idealistic, pleasant and affectionate women who are quite extroverted, altruistic and extremely sensitive. The name stems from both the Hebrew and Greek name for the 'laurel' (bay leaf) tree. I hope that Daphna has a parallel Hebrew root, rather than deriving from the Greek, because according to Greek mythology, Daphna is a nymph – the daughter of a great river god, with whom Appolo, the sun god, fell madly in love. According to the myth, when Apollo chased her, Daphna called her father for help and he transformed her into the lovely laurel tree. Since then, the Greeks considered the bay leaf tree sacred and used it for various temple rituals. Therefore, I would think twice before choosing the name 'Daphna.' Bay leaf's scientific name stems from the Latin 'laurus' meaning 'verdant' and 'nobilis' meaning 'noble,' or 'of high rank.' The bay leaf tree is indeed known as a symbol of esteem, glory, love and honor. Great men and women were crowned with it to signify their importance in both ancient Greece and Rome. Garlands of bay laurel were traditionally bestowed upon the winners of the Pythian games in Greece and later of the Olympic games. Today, grand prix winners are given wreathes of laurel, and 'laureate' as in poet laureate and baccalaureate (lit. 'laurel berry') is a title of honor. The expression, 'to rest on one's laurels' which means 'to rest after victory and success,' further demonstrates the high status of the laurel tree.



Between Healing and Witchcraft

The bay leaf tree is an evergreen tree with green, smooth leaves, native to the southern Mediterranean region. It flourishes in most parts of Israel, including my garden. I have a huge bay leaf tree which provides enough leaves to spice our entire neighborhood. I also have found several self-planted baby bay leaf trees in nooks and corners of my garden. We used some of the bay leaf branches to decorate my home in honor of Shavuot. With bay leaf in abundance, I will try to burn them as incense since I just learned that bay leaf fumes have many health benefits. However, I certainly will not be swayed by the superstitious belief – stemming from the Greeks – to write wishes on bay leaves and then burn them to make them come true. We can determine which herbal practices are not forbidden as witchcraft in the Torah based on the following two criteria: 1. If the practice is mentioned in the Torah, or by respected Rabbis, such as planting a rue in front of your house for spiritual protection. (See my article about the protective rue.) 2. If there is biochemical evidence or probability that the particular herbal procedure has health benefits. Based on the last principle, I list a number of health benefits of burning bay leaves after having weeded out the superstitious, forbidden practices.

Burning Bay Leaves

Although ancient temples routinely burned bay leaves to clear the space and heighten intuitive powers, today there is reason for the resurfacing practice of burning bay leaves in our homes. The fumes from burned bay leaves release certain natural components that are a potent remedy for anxiety and stress, tension and fatigue, as well as for respiratory relief. With no toxic components, burning bay leaves is a safe and natural way to relieve all manner of conditions. Properly burned bay leaves will release their healing benefits quickly.

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1. Place one dried bay leaf in an ashtray or appropriate holder.
2. Set the leaf on fire and leave the room while it burns.
3. Close the door to allow the aroma to fill the space.
4. When you return, gently blow on the embers and inhale deeply.

Burning Bay Leaves for Anxiety

Bay leaves also contain a significant amount of linalool, widely known for its stress-relieving qualities. Burning bay leaves releases their medicinal nerve-soothing effect into the air, which when inhaled has a relaxing affect. A recent study conducted through the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists found linalool to greatly reduce stress. The study showed that the desired effects could be felt in less than 10 minutes after inhaling fumes from the burning bay leaves. Due to its ability to lower stress hormones, bay leaf essential oils can be used in aromatherapy to treat mental health issues.

Burning Bay Leaf for an Energy Boost

Bay leaves contain powerful compounds such as pinene, cineol, and elemicin. These simultaneously alleviate fatigue and produce a pleasant energy boost. The best way to activate these energizing compounds is through burning bay leaves. Freshly dried bay leaves will produce more beneficial results.

Bay Leaf Steam for Respiratory Relief

Bay leaves help break up and remove mucus and phlegm. Soak fresh leaves in clean water or pick up a small vial of bay leaf oil and use it in a humidifier to create a steamy vapor that you then breathe in. You can also simply boil the treated water on the stovetop or rub the oil on your chest area to alleviate respiratory problems, allergies, and asthma.

Bay Leaves for Pest Control

Bay leaves are a safe and effective way to get rid of annoying pests. You can scatter them in a pantry to repel meal moths, flies, cockroaches, mice, and silverfish. While the leaves discourage the growth of molds, they are not effective for killing large beetles and the like. The fumes of burning bay leaves are highly unpleasant to many insects, and routine practice will drive them out of infested spaces for good. The vapors they release kill insects slowly but effectively.

Spiritual Spice

In addition to its medicinal and culinary uses, bay leaves also remove unpleasant energy. In the Mishna, the word דַּפְנָה/*dafna* means 'an outer wall,' which provides protection. This concurs with the tradition of using bay leaves to cleanse a space and provide spiritual protection. Bay leaves were worn as amulets to ward off negativity and kept in a sachet for protection. People also used to soak leaves for three days in water, then strain and sprinkle the water around the house for protection. Additional spiritual qualities attributed to bay leaves, such as bringing success, increasing strength and psychic awareness may be due to their stress releasing properties. Stress, anxiety and tension block our natural ability to be successful. When we use bay leaf to reduce stress and anxiety, we are empowered to tune into our innate spiritual intuition and activate our psychic sixth sense.

Medicinal Properties

Bay leaves have long been a common addition to various dishes due to their ability to aid in digestion and regulate metabolism. They can be used in cooking, taken in tea, or herbal baths, and

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infused in oil. Bay leaves are very detoxifying and relieve anti-inflammatory ailments by stimulating the body to release toxins through the skin by inducing perspiration. Bay leaves have antiseptic, antioxidant, digestive, diuretic and probable anti-cancer activity. They contain Vitamin A and are especially rich in Vitamin C, which has wound healing and antiviral properties that boost the immune system. Recent research found that bay leaves protect the heart because they contain both caffeic acid and rutin. Caffeic acid removes bad cholesterol from the cardiovascular system. Rutin is vital for strengthening capillaries in the walls of the heart and limbs. Bay leaves also regulate blood pressure, and contain folic acid, which aids in DNA synthesis. Bay leaf oil, used in cosmetics, soaps, and detergents, treats arthritic pains, lower back pain, earaches, sore muscles, and sprains. When used in ointment the antibacterial properties of bay leaves help keep wounds clean and encourage healing. They also stimulate healthy skin growth for clear, youthful skin. Some rub bay leaf oil into the scalp for dandruff, and apply it to the skin for pain, especially muscle and joint pain (rheumatism). Others steep bay leaves in water and then rub them on the scalp while washing the hair.

Culinary Uses

Fresh or dried bay leaves are great flavor enhancements in soup, cholent, and stew due to their distinctive flavor and fragrance. Remove the leaves from the cooked food before eating. The fresh leaves are very mild and do not develop their full flavor until several weeks after picking and drying. Therefore, when using fresh leaves add double or triple the amount.

Hands On

Bay leaves can be so much more than mere garnish. They offer various health benefits, when we add them in dishes, use them in teas, or grind them into powder for salves and oils. Essential bay leaf oil is also very beneficial in aromatherapy. The easiest way for people like me – who want a no-fuss method – is to make bay leaf tea. All you have to do is steep some leaves in water for a little while and drink it just as you would any herbal tea. My husband noticed that bay leaf and mint tea is a good combination.

Hearty Barley Soup

Excerpt from *The Seven Fruits of the Land of Israel with their Mystical & Medicinal Properties*

A big pot of barley soup simmering on the stove warms the heart during stormy, rainy weather.

Half a diced onion
 2 diced carrot
 2 diced celery stalks
 Additional vegetables of your choice such as leeks, kohlrabi, parsley and celery root
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 8 cups water or vegetable broth
 ½ cup hulled uncooked barley
 ½ cup presoaked beans of your choice
 1/3 cup crushed tomatoes or tomato sauce
 2 large bay leaves
 ½ teaspoon of each basil, oregano and thyme
 ½ teaspoon sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
 1 teaspoon onion powder (optional)
 ¼ teaspoon celery-salt (optional)

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1. In a large soup pot, sauté the onions for five minutes or more until translucent.
2. Add celery, carrots and any other vegetables and continue to sauté for three to five minutes.
3. Add the remaining ingredients including the liquids and bring to a boil, then reduce heat to medium low.
4. Allow soup to simmer for at least one hour, stirring occasionally, until the barley is soft and somewhat fluffy.
5. Adjust the spices according to taste and enjoy!