

Bay leaf

Scientific name: *Laurus nobilis*



About this spice

Also known as “noble laurel” and “sweet bay,” the bay tree can grow to a height of 30 feet in its native Mediterranean environment. When fresh, bay leaves have a slightly bitter taste; however, as they dry, they sweeten and have a strong aroma. Our bay leaves are shipped whole, and the light-green, brittle leaves are ready for use in a number of recipes.

How to use this spice

The various uses of bay leaf are too many to list, but we’ll list a few that you’ll find especially welcome in your kitchen. But don’t get carried away! Bay leaf is a powerful spice—a half of a leaf is usually enough to begin with. Use bay leaf to flavor the following:

- ✓ marinades
- ✓ stews and soups
- ✓ dishes that use cooked tomatoes
- ✓ fish
- ✓ puddings and sauces
- ✓ pickles

Spice trivia

Next time you watch the Olympics, think about the important role that the bay leaf has played in the games. Victors traditionally were crowned with bay wreaths or garlands. Also, we get the term “baccalaureate” (literally, “laurel berries”), which refers to academic honors, from the bay. Bay leaves (and other parts of the bay tree) also have been used medicinally, to treat such things as infection, and as an insect repellent. Such is the power of the bay, that it also was used to keep evil “at bay.”

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Cinnamon

Scientific name: Cinnamomum verum



About this spice

A member of the same family (Lauraceae) as bay, the cinnamon tree also can reach heights of 30 feet or more. The spice you know as cinnamon comes from the bark of the tree, and the best cinnamon comes from the pale bark of young shoots. The bark is stripped and dried, after which it curls into “quills.” Ground cinnamon is best bought in small quantities, as the spice loses its flavor quickly.

How to use this spice

Cinnamon has a sweet flavor and a distinct aroma that you probably associate with dessert. In addition to many Middle Eastern and North African dishes, you can use cinnamon to flavor the following:

- ✓ sweet creams
- ✓ chocolate
- ✓ cakes and baked goods
- ✓ milk and rice puddings
- ✓ fruit desserts

Spice trivia

You know that Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492. But did you know that he was looking for cinnamon? Columbus and other explorers set out to find a direct sea route to the “spice lands.” Among others, cinnamon was one of the principal spices that motivated this exploration in the fifteenth century. In addition, cinnamon, one of the first known spices, has been used for everything from embalming to mouthwash.

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Cloves

Scientific name: *Syzygium aromaticum* (*Eugenia caryophyllus*)



About this spice

The leaves of the clove tree are similar to those of the bay. The clove tree thrives only in tropical, seaside climates. The pinkish-red flower buds, which contain yellow petals and a mass of stamens, are harvested and dried until they turn brown. Cloves have a strong, warming flavor and aroma.

How to use this spice

Because clove oil is highly scented, a little bit will go a long way. For example, a single, whole clove will flavor an entire apple pie. Use cloves to flavor the following:

- ✓ meats
- ✓ deserts
- ✓ spice mixtures
- ✓ salad dressings

Spice trivia

Cloves contain a strong antiseptic and have a slight anesthetic quality. Some people chew cloves to ease a toothache. Traditionally, they have been used to treat nausea and indigestion. At various times, wars have been fought over the rights to the clove industry.

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Coriander

Scientific name: Coriandrum sativum



About this spice

Coriander is made from the seeds of the dried fruit of the coriander plant. The leaves are used to make another spice, cilantro. The seeds have a strong, sweet aroma and a slightly bitter citrus flavor. The plant grows wild in southeast Europe and also is found in India, China, Egypt, and Morocco.

How to use this spice

Cilantro seeds are easy to crush, so they are best bought whole. Use coriander to flavor the following:

- ✓ liqueurs
- ✓ stews
- ✓ pickles
- ✓ marinades
- ✓ beans
- ✓ chili
- ✓ pastries

Spice trivia

Coriander also is known as “dizzycorn” because it can have a narcotic effect when eaten in very large quantities. Long used by monks as a medicine to treat maladies, it is still used today in some medicines to hide the unpleasant medicine taste.

Cumin

Scientific name: Cuminum cyminum



About this spice

A member of the same family (Umbelliferae) as coriander, the cumin plant has the same slender stems and segmented, threadlike leaves. The seeds are used to make the spice cumin, which has a powerful, warming aroma and a sharp and slightly bitter flavor.

How to use this spice

Lightly roasting cumin before use will bring out the aroma. If ground, it must be kept in an airtight container, so that it won't lose its pungency. Used in excess, it can overwhelm the other spices in a dish. Commonly found in spicy dishes, you can use cumin to flavor the following:

- ✓ curry powder
- ✓ chili powder
- ✓ stews
- ✓ rice

Spice trivia

Cumin traditionally has been thought of as a panacea, able to cure whatever ails you. Specifically, it was thought that cumin could cure digestive conditions, and it also has been used to reduce nausea in pregnancy.

Nutmeg

Scientific name: *Myristica fragrans*



About this spice

The nutmeg tree is an evergreen that grows to a height of almost 30 feet. Inside the large, yellow fruit is the heavy seed used to make the spice nutmeg. The bright red membrane surrounding the seed is called aril or mace, which is used separately to make another spice.

How to use this spice

You should buy nutmeg whole, since they lose their strength quickly once cut. When you need some for a recipe, use a cheese grater or a special nutmeg grater. Commonly used in sweet and savory dishes, you can use nutmeg to flavor the following:

- ✓ cakes
- ✓ sweet cream
- ✓ milk puddings
- ✓ soufflés
- ✓ apple pie
- ✓ stewed potatoes
- ✓ eggnog

Spice trivia

Nutmeg traditionally has been used as an aid to digestion. Taken in very large doses, it is a dangerous narcotic; in small doses, however, it is a mild sedative. Even if you use a large dose of nutmeg in your dishes, you need not be concerned about its negative effects.

Pepper

Scientific name: *Piper nigrum*



About this spice

In the wild, the pepper vine climbs about 20 feet up jungle trees; on a plantation, though, it's typically about half that height. Black pepper is made from the berries that grow on the vine. They are harvested while still unripe and then dried until they are shriveled and black. White pepper, on the other hand, is made from the ripe berries. Pepper has a hot, pungent aroma and flavor.

How to use this spice

Buy whole peppercorns to ensure that the flavor doesn't deteriorate, and grind them with a pepper mill prior to use. Pepper is ubiquitous as a spice; grind some fresh pepper over almost any dish to add flavor. In addition, add whole peppercorns to marinades, stock, and stews for extra flavor.

Spice trivia

More than any other spice, pepper historically has driven the spice trade. In fact, when Columbus landed in America looking for pepper (among other spices), he brought back the hot chilies used by the native peoples and claimed they were "pepper." To this day, they're known as "chili peppers." (In fact, the pepper vine isn't native to the Americas; however, Brazil today is one of the world's largest pepper producers.) At times throughout history, pepper has even been used as a form of money. Part of its value lies in the fact that whole peppercorns can last many years without losing their flavor and aroma. In addition to its historical value, pepper also has been used as a stimulant and an aid to digestion.