

Umbellularia - Growing Guide

Growing Umbellularia Californica

California laurel, Headache tree

This evergreen tree has a variable habit in the garden at Caerhays. One 30 year old plant grows as an erect upright tree of about 15-18ft in height which resembles an evergreen oak. Conversely, the other grows more as a spreading shrub with a floppy sideways habit and no clear trunk. The shrubby plant has much larger leaves.

The RHS Encyclopedia recommends this as Pruning Group 1. In other words it needs a hard pruning each year to near ground level to encourage more subsequent new growth. If you were growing it as a laurel hedge this might perhaps be appropriate but, to admire the full extent and beauty of *U. californica* as a freestanding tree, we would not recommend any pruning at all.

Umbellularia have 4in long elliptic or obovate leathery leaves. After a hot summer it produces umbels of yellowish green flowers from the leaf axils on the stems in late winter or spring. We have yet to see our plants produce rounded purple berries.

This is a highly aromatic tree but, do be warned, that if you crush the leaves and inhale the smell you may well get a severe headache and feel sick. Much the same effect as from smoking marijuana. Certainly this was the effect on our garden team when we were comparing the leaves on our two trees recently.

It is a perfectly hardy tree in Cornwall but needs to be grown in full sun in a hot and dry location with shelter from cold winds. In colder locations you may get winter dieback and then Pruning Group 1 action might well be necessary.

Semi-ripe cuttings taken in midsummer and placed on bottom heat are slow to root but, without ripe seed, this is the only propagation method available to us. It is rare for us to be able to offer more than a very few of this unusual tree in the UK. Joining the website waiting or wish list may well be necessary.



Umbellularia californica



Umbellularia californica



Umbellularia californica



Umbellularia californica



Umbellularia californica



Umbellularia californica
and *Clematis montana*
'Alba'



Umbellularia gravifolia

