

☒ At this time of year and with an increased number of Polish folk living in Britain it is worth making a specific note of the Cherry Laurel and perhaps also making your children familiar with it. It is a widespread shrub used in urban spaces. In the spring it has clumps of attractive white flowers and at this time of year ? August onwards these result in fruits which look like a small glossy black cherry. Throughout the year the shrub retains glassy dark green oval leaves, which can be confused with the Bay leaf. Such a mistake as popping a could of leaving in your lasagna would result in the whole family spending the evening in A&E. although the greater majority of the toxic agents would have evaporated due to cooking temperatures and your mistake would be unlikely to be fatal. The seeds, twigs and wilted leaves of the plant contain the chemicals Cyanogenic Glycoside and Amygdalin which are very poisonous and can cause death if eaten. The chemicals result in the evolution of cyanide if the leaves or pits within the berries specifically, are crushed. The whole plant should be treat with a reasonable respect. Certainly using a garden chipper to dispose of the prunings in a confined space would be very unwise. Likewise transporting bundles or prunings in a car would be much safer with at least one window open.

The increased danger of poisoning over several years has counter-intuitively arisen as a result of the greater skill of our Eastern Europeans friends when dealing with wild plants and fungi. In Poland a sweet jam is prepared in some rural locations using the fruiting bodies of the Cherry Laurel. Great care is used in removing the flesh from the berry without damaging the pit within. In doing so they harvest the only part of the whole plant which is safe to eat. Unfortunately in recent year several children have been seriously poisoned having eaten the fruits. I has been suggested that seeing Eastern European people collecting the berries has given the false impression that they are safe to eat.

Although it would be dangerous to indicate a lethal dose, both the leaves and the pit within the berry can readily kill a grown adult in surprisingly small quantities. It is best admired as a shrub and left well alone. Making, especially, teenagers aware of the dangers of this shrub could save unnecessary incidences of poisoning.