PROPAGATION AND CULTIVATION OF *PRUNUS LAUROCERASUS* 'SCHIPKAENSIS'

GARY ADAMS

P.O. Box 593
Watkinsville, Georgia 30677

The species, *Prunus laurocerasus*, or English laurel, is native to southeastern Europe and Asia Minor and has been known in cultivation since 1576. It is a large, wide-spreading evergreen shrub growing 10 ft. tall or more, with a spread up to twice that. It is a medium-textured plant with medium to dark green leaves, which lose some of their luster in cold climates. The leaves are alternate, simple, and about ⅓ as wide as long. The leaves may be as long as 6 inches, and are obscurely serrate to nearly entire. The ¼ in. white flowers are borne in 5-in. long racemes in April to May and are unpleasantly fragrant. The fruit is a round purple to black drupe ⅕ to ½-in. long. The fruit is often lost among the foliage.

Prunus laurocerasus is a medium-fast grower capable of attaining 10 ft. in 5 to 6 years under favorable conditions. It is hardy to Zone 6. This species and its cultivars are shade tolerant and withstand pruning quite well. They are relatively easy to transplant balled and burlapped or from containers. Compared to its cultivars, 'Schipkaensis', 'Zabeliana', and 'Otto Luyken', *Prunus laurocerasus* is large, coarser, and less susceptible to some disease problems.

The cultivar 'Schipkaensis' derives its name from its place of origin, Shipka Pass in Bulgaria. Like the species, it usually grows wider than tall. It may grow to 10 ft. but is usually seen in the 4 to 6 ft. range. It also is a medium-textured plant with medium to dark green leaves about ⅓ as wide as long. Leaf length is 2 to 4½ in. The leaves may be entire but some always have some serration — a point which distinguishes 'Schipkaensis' from 'Zabeliana'. Flowering and fruiting has been observed to be sparse.

Schip laurel may grow over 12 in. in a year but is usually slower. Hardy to Zone 5, it maintains good foliage color through cold weather. It has been grown on Hilton Head Island and does quite well in Macon, Georgia. Schip laurel takes well to pruning, but when started as a bushy plant, no pruning is needed.

Why is schip laurel so popular? We have already mentioned its hardiness, adaptability to pruning, good foliage color through the winter, and shade tolerance. Shade is not necessary but may be an advantage in container culture to help

keep roots cool. Another main factor is that other evergreens in its size category — several of the *Ilex* cultivars, and junipers, euonymous cultivars, and dwarf Burford holly — have been overused, in the author's opinion, and schip laurel provides an alternative. Schip laurel does not look formal or manufactured; it is informal and natural-looking in many situations. Its texture and dark foliage color makes it useful in combination with other plants. Schip laurel makes an excellent foil for light colored plant material like sycamore or birch trunks, and variegated liriope. Furthermore, established in the landscape, it is a relatively low-maintenance plant.

Prunus laurocerasus 'Zabeliana', or Zabel laurel, was introduced into the nursery trade in Europe about the turn of the century. Like 'Schipkaensis', it is smaller and more refined than the species. Zabel is more spreading than schip laurel. Dirr (1) reports plants 5 ft. tall and 25 ft. broad. Proportions of 3 ft. high and 6 ft. spread are common. This spreading habit may not be evident under shaded or crowded conditions. Zabel and schip laurel are easily confused. Typically, Zabel laurel leaves are more slender; they are always smooth-edged, while most leaves on a schip laurel show some serration. Schip and Zabel laurel mixed together in mass plantings are indistinguishable from a distance and obviously different only to an informed observer at a close distance. Unlike 'Schipkaensis', Zabel laurel is free-flowering. It also has a Zone 5 hardiness rating.

'Otto Luyken' laurel was introduced by a German nursery in 1968. It is the smallest, most compact of the cultivars under discussion. It may grow 3 to 4 ft. tall with a 6 to 8-ft. spread, but does not attain this size rapidly. 'Otto Luyken's' leaves are typically 3 to 4 in. long and 1 in. wide. It is quite floriferous, even in the shade. The author is unsure of this cultivar's hardiness. Because of its dark green color and compact habit, 'Otto Luyken' is becoming very popular.

Propagation of schip laurel is not difficult. Semi-hard to hardened terminal growth will root any time of year. Fastest results will be obtained during the summer when the new growth has hardened to the point that it snaps when bent. Although no controlled tests comparing media or rooting stimulators have been made, success with sand, perlite, sterilized sandy topsoil, and pine bark has been observed. The use of a root stimulator promoted faster, more profuse rooting. No special procedures are necessary to root schip laurel, but sanitation and preventive sprays are required to produce healthy material consistently. It is not necessary to strip or wound the cuttings.

Two procedures for rooting schip laurel have been highly successful. One involves taking 4- to 6-in. semi-hardened cuttings from June through September, treating them with a fungicide dip in 16% Manzate (maneb) at 1 tbsp/gal. and then a quick dip in a solution of 0.2% IBA and 0.1% NAA in alcohol. The cuttings are stuck under intermittent mist. Root formation may be observed in as little as 3 weeks, with most cuttings ready to be hardened off in 3 to 4 more weeks.

With the second method, cuttings are made of the current season's growth from September through November. These also are immersed in a broad-spectrum fungicide, like Captan or a Benlate (benomyl)-Manzate combination. These hardened cuttings get the same IBA-NAA quick dip. Cuttings are stuck in a fumigated ground bed of well-drained sandy loam and wet down thoroughly. The bed is covered with plastic stretched over wire hoops, the edges of the plastic are buried to seal in moisture and warmth, and shade is provided by a cover of Saran 50% shade cloth. No mist is applied. Maintenance consists of regular moisture checks and monthly fungicide sprays. Because of the time of the year rooting is much slower. By spring the cuttings are rooted and may be transplanted or left to grow on in the bed for a season. When left undisturbed in a ground bed, schip laurel may put on 6 to 9 in. of growth in a summer. Naturally, pruning to induce branching is preferable.

Schip laurel is very marketable and easy to propagate. However, it can prove frustrating to produce a high-quality plant to sell, especially in container production. There are several potential problems, but the most serious are root-rot and shot-hole disease.

As with other *Prunus* species, good soil aeration is a must for schip laurel. Deep planting in a container or the ground will result in poor performance or death. *Prunus laurocerasus* and its cultivars are not tolerant of overwatering.

Shot-hole disease is self-descriptive. It is seldom fatal but can easily ruin the appearance of a plant. With a mild case, a few round holes might be easily overlooked. But shot-hole can progress until a majority of leaf tissue is damaged, and the result is most unsightly. Shot-hole was once thought to be a fungus disease but is known now to be a bacterial problem. One group of causal organisms is certain *Xanthomonas* species. Plants under frequent overhead irrigation suffer shot-hole much more readily than unirrigated or occasionally-irrigated plants. Some growers have stopped container production of schip laurel and turned entirely to field production for this reason.

There are steps to take to try to avoid problems with shot-hole disease on schip laurel. Minimize free moisture on the foliage by adequate spacing and by watering early enough to allow leaves to dry before nightfall. Maintain a regular preventive spray program with a material that is effective against bacterial organisms.

It is not unusual to have problems with shot-hole even after doing everything practical to avoid it. It is not unusual for the disease to appear suddenly in a finished crop of plants. It is not unusual to have problems with shot-hole worse on one cultivar one year, and worse on another the next year. No one cultivar seems more resistant than another.

Another problem encountered on schip laurel is peach scale, which attacks the stems and is easily overlooked. This pest can be disastrous. Recommended treatments are oil emulsion sprays during the mild spring and fall months, and Cygon or Malathion according to label instructions during the summer.

They are also susceptible to damage from spider mites and tent caterpillars. Both of these pests may be prevented or killed by standard sprays.

If one is careful, and with luck to avoid disease and insect problems, schip laurel is not a demanding plant. Usually pruning while young to encourage branching yields full, shapely plants. Slightly acid soil is best. Schip laurel has no peculiar nutritional demands; it is reputedly not a heavy feeder and is not prone to iron chlorosis or other similar problems, yet it responds well to fertilization. Schip laurel is not hard to transplant. It does not grow well in a container during very hot conditions, but this is true of many other ornamentals.

Once established in the landscape in well-aerated soil and protected from severe drought, the *Prunus laurocerasus* cultivars are attractive, low-maintenance plants. They offer designers hardy, dark green, medium-textured evergreens in a very useful size category. They are highly marketable and easy to propagate. Schip laurel is commonly field-grown with good success. The challenge lies in container culture, where close attention to water, correct potting, situations favorable for shot-hole disease, and good luck are necessary for success.

LITERATURE CITED

1. Dirr, Michael A. 1983. Manual of woody landscape plants. Champaign, IL: Stipes Pub. Co., p. 555.