

The Mighty Oak

“Those green robed senators of mighty woods,” wrote Keats of the Oak tree. The often-overlooked Oak has over 600 species, evergreen and deciduous and is found all over the world. Our forefathers honored the Oak as our national tree. It is vital for our commercial lumber industry, is long lived, grows in varied environments and soils and is one of the best trees to support wildlife.

Doug Tallamy author of *Bringing Nature Home* said, “Oaks are the quintessential wildlife plant: no other plant genus supports more species of Lepidoptera, thus providing more types of bird food, than the mighty Oak.” They supply the bulk of nuts needed for wildlife such as deer, raccoons, turkeys, mice, black bears, squirrels and wood ducks. Their bark and leaves provide homes for over 500 species of insects. Their cavities create a secure nesting site for birds.

There are several Oaks that make excellent residential trees: White, Red, Pin, and Willow.



The White Oak, *Quercus alba*, is a massive tree of the Eastern United States grows upwards of 75- 100 feet in the wild but closer to 50-80 feet in suburbia. Its rounded canopy can grow as wide as its height, so plant it in a location with lots of room. These trees are the longest living of the Oaks, some live up to 400 years. The hardy White Oak can withstand drought, heat, road salt and pollution. Their leaves have 7-9 rounded lobes and are 5-9 inches long by 2-4 inches wide. They have small drooping catkins and $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long acorns that ripen in one season.

The Pin Oak, *Quercus palustris*, tops out at 60-70 feet high and spreading 25-40 feet wide in a pyramidal shape with long drooping branches. It is a fast growing tree that will reach heights of 30 feet in only 12 years. It gets its common name “Pin” from the short, tough branchlets along its limbs. Its 3-5 inch long by 2-5 inch wide, 5 toothed leaves turn a brilliant red in autumn and are known for staying on the branches until late winter. It has short reddish brown acorns that ripen every other year. The Pin Oak is easy to transplant because of its shallow fibrous roots. The wood, however, is not valuable as it is prone to warping and splitting. Pin Oaks are an excellent choice for the home that has a damp site.



One of my favorite oaks is the Willow Oak, *Quercus phellos*. It has fine willow-like foliage with a rounded canopy. Its attractive bark makes it a beautiful tree in winter. The Willow Oak is a fast growing tree but tops out at 40-60 feet high by 30-40 feet wide. This trouble free tree has no serious diseases or pest problems and thrives in a moist environment. It has narrow light green leaves that turn a russet red in autumn. Each leaf is tipped with a bristle. The acorns are very small and topped with a shallow cap. It is one of the best Oaks for street planting or large plot residences as it is an excellent shade tree with fine texture and unusual leaves.

Oaks are long lived, some for more than 400 years. They live in a range of soils from wet to dry and tolerate acidic soils. Their strong, straight trunks grow upwards of 100 feet and are the backbone of the lumber industry. The Revolutionary War Frigate USS Constitution “Old Ironsides” was made from the wood of a White Oak.

By Sandy Phelps '02