

Scarlet Oak – *Quercus coccinea*

Jeri Chase, ODF Agency Affairs Specialist

Looking for a different, relatively-large tree that thrives in full sun, will grace your home with sun-dappled shade, display outstanding, over-the-top color from late fall well into winter, and generously nourishes many varieties of wildlife? Consider the scarlet oak.

Native to the eastern and central United States, this tree is a common sight in many eastern and central dry upland forests from Maine to Florida and west to Minnesota and Missouri. Although not much used here in the Pacific Northwest, scarlet oak would be an excellent choice for the right location in many residential and urban settings.

**Enjoy an emerald canopy in spring,
a scarlet blaze in fall**

“Scarlet oak looks a lot like the mighty pin oak,” says Kristin Ramstad, an urban forester with the department.

It is pyramidal in shape when young, developing a classic rounded, relatively open crown shape when mature. It has horizontal to upright spreading branches that do not tend to sweep downward; lower branches may self-prune as they are shaded out by increased growth.

This is a large, medium- to fast-growing deciduous tree that thrives in full sun, eventually reaching 60-80 feet in height, with a spread of 40-50 feet, and a trunk diameter of one to three feet.

In spring and summer, scarlet oak leaves are a deep, emerald green above and paler green below. Leaves are smooth in texture, alternate, and are three to six inches in length and two to five inches wide. They have seven deep, “C”-shaped lobes per leaf, with bristle tips.

This tree’s bark is smooth and lighter brown on young trees, darkening to grey-black in color and furrowing as the

The leaves of scarlet oak have “C”-shaped lobes and bristle tips.

Photo from ODF archives





Late in the autumn the leaves of the scarlet oak change to brilliant colors, from deep russet to scarlet red. This color extends well into winter – long after other showy species fade.

Photo by Paul Ries, ODF

tree ages, and the trunk often swells at the base. The inner wood is reddish in color.

“Scarlet oak has stunning fall color and grows into a large canopy tree. It is very unusual around here, but it would grow well,” says Ramstad. In fact, this oak takes both its common and scientific names from the Latin word for scarlet - “coccinea,” referring to its brilliant fall color display, considered the best of all the oaks. Late in the autumn, the emerald green leaves change to brilliant colors from deep russet to scarlet, and this color extends well into winter, long after other showy species fade, which can make for a spectacular show against a snowy background.

Versatile acorns, plus a unique leaf shape

Acorns of this oak are small to medium in size – one-half to one inch long, and form singly or in pairs. Half of the nut is covered by a deep cap, and they’re a favorite food for many wildlife species, including grey squirrels, chipmunks, mice, deer, blue jays, woodpeckers, wild turkeys, common grackle, and grouse.

Native Americans found many uses for oaks native to America including using the acorns for making coffee, and drying and grinding them into powder that was used for thickening soups and stews or mixed with cereals for bread. The bitter flavor from its tannins was leached out by placing them in a running stream for days or weeks and letting the water wash the tannins away, or by burying them for seasons on end in boggy ground.

Scarlet oak tannin was also used medicinally as an astringent, and in the treatment of hemorrhaging and intestinal problems. The common galls found on the scarlet oak – formed as a result of insect larvae activity – are a rich source of tannin used for tanning animal skins and dye.

The scarlet oak is a member of the “red oak” group of oaks and many of its

other names – black oak, red oak, buck oak, spotted oak, and Spanish oak – are actually names of some of those other species. It can be difficult to differentiate between this and the other red oaks. Key features of the scarlet oak are the deep “C”-shaped lobes on its leaves (as compared to the often “U”-shape in other species), deep acorn-covering cap, and stunning late fall color.

Location, location, location

The right tree for the right place is always critical when choosing trees for urban and residential areas. For the scarlet oak, selecting a proper location is even more important: this tree develops a deep, single taproot, and will not likely survive transplanting if you change your mind about where you want it to be.

Scarlet oak can be a good choice for a shade, lawn, or street tree. Because of its relatively open crown, it provides light shade that you can garden and grow lawn beneath, and horizontal root growth is not a problem. The lack of drooping limbs also makes it an excellent street tree; although the flare at the base of its trunk can lift sidewalks and curbs if planted in space that is too small for it to mature – less than eight feet wide. It can be an excellent option for large parking lot islands, buffer strips, and median strip street plantings.

In its native range, it is often found on the dry side of ridges, bluffs, and slopes. As an urban or residential tree, this oak needs little maintenance. It needs very little, if any, pruning, is durable and not prone to breakage, tolerates strong winds, and is relatively pest- and disease-resistant in an urban setting. It can tolerate a wide variety of soils, including sand and gravel, only requires normal moisture, and is somewhat drought tolerant.

Although only grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries, this oak is well worth searching out. For unsurpassed autumn and winter foliage, cool summer shade, and a tree that will attract wildlife and all of their antics, consider the scarlet oak. 🍂