

What's so special about Oregon White Oaks?

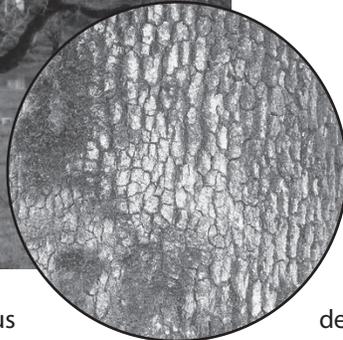
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Photo by Cynthia Orlando, ODF

Oregon white oak tree, leaves and bark.



Photos courtesy OSU Department of Horticulture



The Oregon white oak (*Quercus garryana*) is an attractive deciduous hardwood tree native to Oregon, found as far north as British Columbia and as far south as southern California. These lovely hardwoods seem able to withstand both lengthy flooding and drought, and are most common on sites that are either too exposed or too dry for other tree species.

During the 1800's oak savanna was a common sight in the Willamette Valley. Mature oaks provided an abundance of food for the Kalapuya Indians, who used the tree's acorns to make acorn meal. Its large acorns mature in one season, ripening from late August to November.

Although it can reproduce in its own shade, Oregon white oak will die after overtopping by Douglas-fir. Oregon's periodic summer wildfires and the burning practices of the Kalapuya created white oaks that were mostly open-grown, individual trees. However, with the arrival of European settlers and the suppression of most naturally occurring fires, conifers (evergreen trees) like Douglas-fir began to naturally encroach upon the oaks.

It's now estimated that more than 99 percent of pre-settlement prairies and savannas in Oregon have been converted to urban areas, farms, and other

developments. In addition to urban development, yet another challenge to this native tree is the spread of invasive plant species. In order to germinate, its seeds need to be kept moist in soil or under leaf litter. Unfortunately, invasive, non-native plants like Scotch broom and Himalayan blackberry reduce the survival and growth rate of oak seedlings.

What's in a name?

The Oregon white oak's scientific name, *Quercus garryana*, was chosen to honor Nicholas Garry, who served as deputy governor and as a board member of the Hudson Bay Company. In the early 1800's the Hudson Bay Company served as a center of the fur trade in the vicinity of Winnipeg, Man. Canada. Garry was known for his tactful and diplomatic fur trade dealings with both whites and Natives alike.

Oregon white oak can also sprout from cut stumps and root collars, and their roots also go deeper than many other tree types. A deep taproot and well-developed lateral roots serve to make them very wind firm, even in wet areas.

In the wood products industry, Oregon white oak's strong, hard, and attractive wood is sometimes used for flooring and other wood products. It has

also been used for furniture, chairs, and wine barrels, and is also frequently used for firewood.

Worth the wait

Generally speaking, Oregon white oaks grow slowly in both height and diameter. Unfortunately, park managers and homeowners don't plant Oregon white oak for landscaping because of its reputation as a slow grower. That's a shame, as this tree really has a lot to offer.

Valuable real estate?

Ask birds, wildlife.

An important aspect about all native plants and trees in general is their ability to provide much-needed habitat for wildlife. Diversity of bird species is often higher in oak forests than in adjacent conifer forests. Oregon white oaks provide favorable habitat to a number of important wildlife types, including the western gray squirrel, which is listed as threatened in Washington and sensitive in Oregon - and to many birds, including dark-eyed juncos, goldfinches, nuthatches, wild turkeys, and acorn and pileated woodpeckers.

Enjoy, appreciate, grow and cultivate these important Oregon natives at every opportunity. 🌱