

Love Those Oaks

Native hardwoods have both cultural and environmental value.

Sublime weather drew a record crowd to this year's Mushroom Festival at Mt. Pisgah Arboretum. I wonder how many visitors noticed the magnificent Oregon white oak trees towering over their heads. Mount Pisgah is one of the best places to see *Quercus Garryana*, once the dominant tree in the Willamette Valley. (The Eugene area has two native oaks; we lie near the northern limit for California black oak.) Before white settlement, an estimated 1.5 million acres of valley land consisted of prairie with scattered oak trees, forming a habitat now called oak savanna. The landscape was kept open by fire, caused by both lightning and the food-gathering methods of the Kalapuya Indians.

Whites brought diseases that devastated the Kalapuya, and the settlers pressed for fire suppression. Once burning stopped around 1840, upland prairie and oak groves gave way to Douglas fir and dense woodland, while the valley floor was plowed for farming. Oak savanna is now one of the region's most threatened ecosystems. Ed Alverson, who manages Willow Creek Natural Area in West Eugene, lives in Santa Clara. He feels there is cultural as well as ecological value in preserving our native oak trees. "Native oaks are really a key feature in the story of this place," he says. "As you look round my neighborhood you can still see big old oak trees. You can sit under a 200-year-old oak and imagine a Native American sitting under that same tree."

If you have native oaks on your property, you'll be doing wildlife a favor if you preserve them. More than 200 species of mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian (as well as countless insects) use oak habitat for food and lodging. Local ornithologist Dave Bontrager stresses the complexity of the system, in which parasites such as wasps and mistletoe play an important role. Parasitic wasps make the hollow galls called "oak apples." When the wasp is done with it the oak apple provides a home for a new insect. Mistletoe berries are enjoyed by birds of the thrush family, including Western bluebirds. And according to Alverson, there is even a butterfly whose larva eats mistletoe leaves!

Many species that use oak trees, including Western gray squirrel and the gregarious acorn woodpecker, do quite well around people. Humans, in turn, do well around oaks. Unlike Douglas firs, which can make a house and yard feel gloomy in winter, these oaks shed their leaves in fall and let in precious winter sunshine. Even in leaf they cast a benign shade, and it is easy to grow plants under them. There is a snag, though: You can shorten the life of native oaks by gardening beneath them if you use a conventional watering regime.

One option is to make your oaks an excuse to do very little gardening. Just remove any competing conifers that will shade out the oaks, and mow under the trees each August to discourage new woody growth. Or you might choose to enrich the understory by re-introducing native plants that occur natu-



Leaves of Oregon white oak.

RACHEL FOSTER

rally in oak habitat. Alverson recommends California fescue ("quite ornamental, tall-growing with graceful seed heads") and Roemer's fescue, another bunch grass with fine textured evergreen leaves. He also suggests *Geranium oreganum*, Oregon iris, and shooting star (*Dodecatheon hendersonii*), all of which "look better in cultivation than in the wild."

Landscaper Keith Oldham has considerable experience with gardening under native oaks, both on his own eight-acre property and for clients of Oakleigh Gardens. I asked him what advice he gives gardeners who are concerned about their oak trees. First, he said, "Avoid activities that will disturb the root structure, such as trenching and soil compaction. You want to avoid summer watering near the crown, which can promote root rot, so don't plant water guzzling plants like rhododendron and astilbe under your trees. Stick to plants that tolerate life on the dry side, like native flowering currant, sword fern, checker mallow, fawn lily and blue-eyed grass." Non-natives that don't need much water include sarcococca, daphne and hardy cyclamen, he said.

An arborist can tell you if the oak trees on your property are native. Oregon white oaks have dark, often convex, leathery leaves with rounded lobes. The leaves of California black oak are pale, thinner and flatter, with pointed lobes. You can see the two together at Morse Ranch on Crest Drive. California black oaks in Eugene often look sick, but Alverson feels these big trees are just dying of old age. He thinks gardeners should consider planting both species from acorns. Plant *lots* of them, he says, and be prepared to outwit the squirrels.

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For more information about oak habitat, contact Walama Restoration Project (484-3939) or the Native Plant Society of Oregon. Rachel Foster can be reached by e-mail: rfoster@efn.org

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