

Learning about Live Oak *Quercus virginiana*

The live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) is an evergreen native to the southeastern United States. Live oaks have a range of shapes, from shrubby to large and spreading, depending on their habitat. Their lowest limbs will swoop down, sometimes resting on the ground, before curving back up again. They can grow at extreme angles, usually due to severe wind conditions. In spring they shed their leaves before growing new ones. The wood of a live oak is heavy, hard, and extremely sturdy.

Characteristics. Live oaks generally have a very dense tree crown, making it an excellent shade tree, and provide excellent nesting habitats for birds and other animals. They typically grow to reach 50 feet high and can have a tree crown that spans almost 165 feet in diameter. Live oaks are fast growing trees and generally live for a very long time. They have simple, alternately arranged leaves, which can grow 2 to 5 inches long. The leaves are usually stiff and leathery, with a shiny, dark green upper surface and a dull grayish green underside. Live oaks have small male and female flowers on the same tree. If growing conditions are good, live oaks can grow as much as four feet in the first year.

Fruit. The acorns of the live oak are about 1 inch long, with a pointed tip. The cap of the acorn is dark brown while the rest of the acorn is a lighter shade of brown. They grow in singles or clusters and mature in one season, dropping off the tree every fall. The acorns are an important food source for whitetail deer and squirrels.

Geographic Range. Live oaks grow in a large variety of habitats, such as woodlands, at the higher edges of marshes, in the city, and scattered in pastures. They can often be found growing in association with other hardwoods, like water oaks and laurel oaks. They grow from Virginia to southern Florida, and west to southern Texas. They can grow in a range of soil types, but are often found on low sandy soils near the coast. They are believed to have a tolerance to salt spray and can survive short term flooding.

Additional Information.

- Live oaks support types of epiphytic plants, like Spanish moss, common to southern Louisiana.
- Live oaks provide food for many birds and mammals, like turkey, wood ducks, jays, quail, whitetail deer, raccoons, and squirrels.
- Live oaks are one of the heaviest native hardwoods, weighing 55 pounds per cubic foot when dry.
- The largest live oak ever recorded was found in Florida, in 1984, measured at 9 feet wide, 83 feet high, and a spread of 150 feet. The second largest on record was found in Louisiana.
- Native Americans used to bend sapling live oaks to grow at extreme angles to mark trails.
- A live oak growing in South Carolina was found to be about 1400 years old.

References:

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Photos by Eric Platt