

*Quercus agrifolia*

[Synonyms : *Quercus acroglandis*, *Quercus acutiglandis*, *Quercus oxyadenia*, *Quercus pricei*]

**COAST LIVE OAK** is an evergreen tree. Native to western North America, it has holly-like, dark greyish-green leaves and pointed, shiny, light reddish-brown acorns.

It is also known as California live oak, Californian field oak, Californian live oak, *Chêne vert de Californie* (French), Coastal live oak, *Dub kalifornský* (Czech), Enceno, Encina, *Encino* (Spanish), Holly-leaved oak, *Kaliforniai tölgy* (Hungarian), *Kalifornische Lebens-Eiche* (German), *Kalifornische Stein-Eiche* (German), *Kristtornblade eg* (Danish), Liveforever, *Tandbladet eg* (Danish), and *Teravatõruline tamm* (Estonian).

This tree has a high resistance to drought, fire, heat and cold. The wood warps and cracks easily. The flowers are pollinated by the wind. The tree attracts insects which produce galls.

*Agrifolia* means ‘with rough or scabby leaves’. Apparently the name Coast live oak arose because the leaves remain throughout the year.

Records indicate that this oak was valued by several North American Indian tribes including the Costanoan and Pomo as a source of food – and the Cahuilla and Luiseño tribes both stored harvested, dried acorns in granaries for a year or more for future use. [The acorns were buried in wet ground during the Winter (or carefully washed in running water – by placing a bag of them in a stream for several weeks) to reduce their tannin content. They were dried and then they boiled or ground into flour.] Both the latter tribes used the ground acorns to make a kind of porridge and the Cahuilla also used acorn flour for making bread and prepared acorn meat as a delicacy for social or ceremonial functions.

Although authorities indicate that coast live oak acorns were a staple food for the Luiseño Indians they appear to make no similar assessment for the Cahuilla tribe yet it is the latter for whom copious notes of the tree’s value seem to be written. Apart from food the Cahuilla strung the acorns on a cord. These were then swung against the teeth to make ‘music’ – and they were also worn as necklaces. Their children played with the acorns and used them for juggling or as jacks, and their hunters set the acorns as bait for catching small animals. Wood from the tree was collected as fuel and the Cahuilla bartered acorn meal (like a cash crop) for food and special services provided by a shaman.

While no mention has yet been found of the Cahuilla tribe’s use of the tree medicinally it would seem that the Mahuna Indians turned to it for healing the bleeding navel of newly born babies.

Early North American settlers found the processed and roasted acorns could serve as a coffee (*Coffea*) substitute.

This was one of the plants collected by the Spanish Malaspina Expedition (1789-1794) that sailed around the Pacific – a venture which in the past has been viewed as ill-fated but which authorities today often consider to have been highly successful. Apparently the Expedition’s aim was a to form a scientific and political assessment of the flora, fauna and native culture in lands over which Spain then had dominion in the Pacific region. Unfortunately however after his return to Spain, Captain Alejandro Malaspina (1754-1810) was arrested and imprisoned for seven years for sedition and both his name and

achievements (which some experts today have even compared with those of Christopher Columbus) were virtually written out of Spanish history. It has been suggested too in more recent years that overlaps in research carried out by this Expedition and that of the subsequent much celebrated 1799-1805 exploration by the Prussian-born naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt (1773-1858), may have propelled the earlier Malaspina Expedition into even greater unwarranted obscurity.

In the past the bark from tanoak (*Lithocarpus densiflorus*), itself high in tannin content and used for tanning heavy leathers, has been adulterated with bark from coast live oak. The tree's galls have not only been used for tanning too but have also been a source of a black material dye.

Acorn cups have been used as buttons.

Locally although this brittle, heavy wood has been used for making wagon wheels

Medicinally, galls were once used for the treatment of diarrhoea, dysentery and haemorrhaging.

A decoction of bark also offered a wash for easing skin