

Quercus coccifera

[Synonyms : *Ilex coccifera*, *Quercus angustifolia*, *Quercus arcuata*, *Quercus aucheri*, *Quercus brachybalanos*, *Quercus calliprinos*, *Quercus calliprinos* var. *fenzlii*, *Quercus calliprinos* var. *palaestina*, *Quercus coccifera* var. *calliprinos*, *Quercus coccifera* var. *pseudococcifera*, *Quercus coccinea*, *Quercus cryptocarpa*, *Quercus fenzlii*, *Quercus inops*, *Quercus kermesina*, *Quercus mesto*, *Quercus palaestina*, *Quercus pseudococcifera*, *Quercus pseudorigida*, *Quercus rigida*]

GRAIN OAK an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to southern Europe, north-western Africa, and western Mediterranean, it has spine-tipped acorns.

It is also known as *Biborgubacstölgy* (Hungarian), *Carrasca* (Spanish), *Carrasco* (Portuguese), *Carrasqueiro* (Portuguese), *Carrasquilla* (Spanish), *Carrie* (French), *Chêne à cochenilles* (French), *Chêne d'Abraham* (French), *Chêne de Mamre* (French), *Chêne de Provence* (French), *Chêne kermès* (French), *Coscó* (Catalan), *Coscoja* (Spanish), *Coscoll* (Catalan), *Coscolla* (Catalan, Spanish), *Dab szkarlatny* (Polish), *Dub kermesový* (Czech), *Gàrric* (Catalan), *Garriguella* (Catalan), *Garritx* (Catalan), *Garroll* (Catalan), *Garrouille* (French), *Grain tree*, *Gubacstölgy* (Hungarian), *Hermes oak*, *Holly oak*, *Karmazsintölgy* (Hungarian), *Katsópurno* (Greek), *Kermeseg* (Danish), *Kermes-Eiche* (German), *Kermes-eik* (Dutch), *Kermesek* (Swedish), *Kermes Meşesi* (Turkish), *Kermes oak*, *Kverko kirmesa* (Esperanto), *Maraña* (Spanish), *Matarrubia* (Spanish), *Matarubia* (Spanish), *Oak of Palestine*, *Parkkitammi* (Finnish), *Pournári* (Greek), *Prinari* (Greek), *Prinós* (Greek), *Purnari* (Greek), *Querce spinosa* (Italian), *Scarlet oak*, *Stech-Eiche* (German), and *Värvitamm* (Estonian).

Warning – some authorities recommend that the galls should only be used externally because of a high tannin content.

The flowers are pollinated by the wind. This tree attracts insects which produce galls.

Coccifera is derived from Latin *coccus* (berry) and *-fer* (bearing, carrying) components meaning ‘berry-bearing’ and, in this instance, is a reference to the scale insect, *chermes* (*Coccus ilicis*) which breeds on the tree and makes the galls.

It is from the name of these gall insects that the common name Kermes oak is also said to be derived. ‘Grain’ of Grain oak refers to the medieval scarlet dye known as *grain* or *grana tinctorum* (Latin).

The Oak of Mamre (Abraham’s Oak) is believed to have been a *Quercus coccifera*.

Traditionally it was associated with Mamre, south of Bethlehem near Hebron, the place where Abraham raised his tent – and according to some authorities it died in 1996.

Legend goes that any man who disfigured this tree would lose his firstborn son.

Acorns from grain oak, when roasted, have provided a substitute for coffee.

The galls of the grain oak have already been referred to. In the past these were boiled for the cochineal-like red dye (known as ‘Turkey Red’) which was familiar from at least biblical times – it was the source of the ‘scarlet’ mentioned in the Christian Bible. Both the 1st Century Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder (23-79) and Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400), the celebrated English poet, refer to it in their writings. The bark (and the acorns) yields a black dye (rich in tannin) which was recommended by Pedanius

Dioscorides, the 1st Century Greek physician – but its use has been limited as the plant is invariably relatively small.

The crest of the Worshipful Company of Dyers in the City of London (England) contains three sprigs of grain oak.

On the island of Cyprus the acorns have provided pig food and the wood has been burnt as fuel.

The Greek philosopher Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC) mentions that the wood was being used during his lifetime for making wheelbarrows, and parts of lyres and psalteries – as well as being used for the static part of firesticks.

Grain oak was introduced to North America in 1683.

Medicinally, the galls have been used to treat diarrhoea, dysentery and haemorrhaging. A leaf decoction has also provided a mouthwash to ease gingivitis and other oral problems. A bark decoction has offered a treatment for some female disorders, chilblains and piles.