

Quercus douglasii

[Synonyms : *Quercus douglasii* var. *ransonii*, *Quercus gambelii*, *Quercus oblongifolia* var. *brevilobata*, *Quercus ransonii*]

BLUE OAK is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western United States, it has bluish-green leaves and tapered, brown acorns.

It is also known as California blue oak, *Chêne bleu* (French), *Dub douglasův* (Czech), *Dub modrý* (Czech), Iron oak, Mountain oak, Mountain white oak, and White oak.

Warning – SEE *Quercus* GENUS entry.

These trees (which are often draped with Fishnet *Ramalina menziesii*) tolerate drought and heat – and they also attract insects which produce galls. The bluish-green leaf-colour is pronounced in periods of drought. The flowers are pollinated by the wind.

Douglasii commemorates the celebrated Scottish plant collector and explorer, David Douglas (1798/9-1834). His interest in flora and fauna appears to have begun before his teens and he eventually worked in Glasgow University's botanical garden. Here he was destined to meet Sir William Hooker (1785-1865) who became his mentor and guide, and in time recommended him to the Horticultural Society of London then seeking a knowledgeable plant collector to send to North America. Thus in 1823 he was exploring parts of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers and what is now New Jersey. He made six expeditions and his exploration expanded to cover not only the Pacific Northwest but ultimately as far south as California and, on three occasions, visits to the Sandwich Islands (now familiar as Hawaii). That first major trip to the Columbia River was sponsored by the Hudson's Bay Company and the Horticultural Society of London arranged for Douglas both to study available material on North American trees and to meet Archibald Menzies (1754-1842) before he set out. Douglas met many leading lights in botany while in North America, and his explorations would eventually cover an incredible number of miles of unexplored territory (10,000 miles from 1825-1827 alone) far from civilization, living rough and mixing with many of the North American Indian tribes. In 1827 he returned to London briefly where he is said to have found his welcome overwhelming and was made a Fellow of The Geological Society and of The Zoological Society of London. During the Pacific Northwest expedition he had suffered snow-blindness and this led to his deteriorating eyesight which when he landed in Hawaii in December 1833 for the last time had reached the stage of virtually no sight in his right eye. His unexpected death occurred when he fell into a pit already occupied by a wild bull which crushed him. A subsequent inquest in Honolulu, where his grave can be found, concluded that there was no evidence of foul play but this did not stem suspicions, even today. He introduced about 240 plant species to Britain, many of which now bear his name.

David Douglas named this tree blue oak in 1831 with reference to the greenish-blue colour of its leaves.

Local North American Indian tribes ate a meal made from the acorns - previously steeped in water to remove any bitterness. They used the liquid from processing the acorns for dyeing their baskets black – and the tree's wood was fashioned into bowls.

The strong wood was once used for shaft supports in gold and silver mines. Commercial exploitation of it has been limited not least because of its short stature (often due to

crooked growth) and the fact that the wood is prone to dry rot. Today it is used locally for fence posts and continues to be burnt locally as fuel.

Blue oak has not only been cultivated as an ornamental especially by landscapers but it has also been planted by environmentalists as its extensive root system helps to prevent soil erosion and can be instrumental in the restoration of wildlife habitat. Some experts even suggest that blue oak is a suitable species for the attentions of bonsai specialists.

Authorities note that Californian woodland inhabited by blue oak is home to protected species known locally as the foothill yellow-legged frog, and both the golden and bald eagles. It also offers cover for types of woodpecker, nuthatch and titmouse. Deer, livestock, rodents (particularly squirrels) and birds such as jays, pigeons, woodpeckers and quail browse on the foliage and/or eat the trees' acorns.