

Quercus imbricaria

[Synonyms : *Quercus aprica*, *Quercus latifolia*, *Quercus obtusa*, *Quercus phellos* var. *imbricaria*]

LAUREL OAK is a deciduous tree. Native to eastern and central North America, it has glossy dark green leaves and bitter-tasting, spine-tipped, dark brown acorns.

It is also known as Black jack oak, *Chêne à bardeaux* (French), *Chêne à feuilles de laurier* (French), *Chêne imbriqué* (French), *Dub celokrajný* (Czech), *Dub škridlicový* (Slovak), Glossy oak, Jack oak, *Laurbæreg* (Danish), Northern laurel oak, *Schindel-Eiche* (German), Shingle oak, *Sindlitamm* (Estonian), Single quercus, Turkey oak, Water oak, and *Zsindelyes tölgy* (Hungarian).

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

Laurel oak is one of three oak trees which has neither lobed nor toothed leaves (the others being the laurel oak *Quercus laurifolia* and the willow oak *Quercus phellos*) with which it is sometimes confused – but the leaves of willow oak can be longer than those of the other two.

The durable, reddish-tinged, light brown wood is usually marketed as ‘Red oak’.

In the states of Georgia and New Jersey in the United States laurel oak is viewed as an endangered species.

Imbricaria is derived from Latin *imbricis* (hollow roof tile) meaning ‘closely and evenly overlapping like roof tiles’. Authorities have suggested that this is a reference to the wood’s use for shingling particularly by the early settlers.

Local North American Indian tribes processed the bitter-tasting acorns by burying them in wet ground during the Winter (or carefully washing them in running water – by placing a bag of them in a stream for several weeks) to reduce the amount of tannin in them – after which they were dried and ground. This powder was included in stews and other dishes as thickening or added to other bread flours to eke them out. Roasted acorns have also provided a coffee substitute.

Records give the impression (possibly incorrectly) that laurel oak was the preserve of the Cherokee North American Indian tribe. They used the wood for construction and for making furniture, baskets and cooking tools – and they also burnt it as fuel.

The tree was a source of medicine for the Cherokee tribe for a wide range of disorders including dysentery, indigestion, urinary ailments, fever, asthma, hoarseness, oral sores and skin problems – and they also took it as a tonic and relied upon it as an antiseptic.

The galls have been used for tanning. They (together with the dark grey to brown bark and flat-scaled acorn cups) were once an important and major source of black ink. This liquid was also used for dyeing.

Until the industrial revolution this coarse-grained, hard, heavy and strong wood was in much demand for making barrels, boxes and crates. Although it was over-harvested dramatically in the 17th and 18th Centuries it can still be used occasionally in parts of the United States today for shingling and cooperage, as well as general construction, clapboards and furniture. But many authorities believe it is primarily looked upon as a source of fuel now.

Laurel oak has been cultivated as an ornamental and shade tree in parks and on lawns and golf courses, as well as a street tree. It has also been grown as a screen or hedging. The tree has been introduced to Europe and is cultivated in France and Germany. The acorns are enjoyed by deer and birds, but most especially squirrels.