

Quercus rubra

[Synonyms : *Quercus ambigua*, *Quercus borealis*, *Quercus borealis* var. *borealis*, *Quercus borealis* var. *maxima*, *Quercus coccinea* var. *ambigua*, *Quercus cuneata*, *Quercus maxima*, *Quercus rubra* var. *ambigua*, *Quercus rubra* var. *borealis*, *Quercus rubra* var. *maxima*, *Quercus rubra* var. *rubra*]

RED OAK is a deciduous tree. Native to eastern North America, it has dark dull green leaves and pale reddish-brown acorns.

It is also known as American red oak, *Amerikaanse eik* (Dutch), *Amerikanische Rot-Eiche* (German), Black oak, Buck oak, Canadian red oak, *Chêne boreal* (French), *Chêne rouge* (French), *Chêne rouge d’Amerique* (French), Common red oak, *Dub červený* (Czech), Eastern red oak, Gray oak, *Kverko ruĝa* (Esperanto), Leopard oak, Maine red oak, Mountain red oak, Northern red oak, North red oak, *Punane tamm* (Estonian), *Quercia rossa* (Italian), *Raudeik* (Norwegian), *Roble americano* (Spanish), *Röd-Eg* (Danish), *Rödek* (Swedish), *Rot-Eiche* (German), Southern red oak, Spanish oak, Spotted oak, Swamp red oak, Water oak, and West Virginia soft red oak.

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

Red oak can be confused with black oak, *Quercus velutina* but the latter’s acorns are half covered by their cups; with southern red oak, *Quercus falcata* and swamp oak, *Quercus palustris* but the latter’s acorns are smaller; and with shumard oak, *Quercus shumardii* but the latter’s leaves have tufts of hair at vein junctions beneath and its acorns’ cups are larger.

Rubra is derived from Latin *ruber* (red).

The oblong acorns were a staple part of the diet of some of the North American Chippewa Indian tribe. They were also eaten by the Iroquois, by the Dakota, Ponca and Pawnee tribes (after being immersed in basswood ashes to remove the bitter taste) and by the Omaha and Potawatomi tribes (after the bitter taste had been removed by boiling with wood ashes). The Potawatomi used the processed acorns to make a kind of porridge.

Red oak wood was used by Cherokee Indians for basketry, for making cooking tools, furniture (and even railway sleepers) – and it was burnt as fuel. The tree’s bark was used by some of the Chippewa tribe for tanning, the Omaha used it to make a black dye for their porcupine quills – and the Potawatomi dyed the rushes (with which they wove matting) a reddish-brown colour with it.

It is interesting to note that it was the leaves of this tree that inspired the leaf design used by the Potawatomi Indians in their beadwork.

The tree was a source of medicine for quite a few North American Indian tribes. Mahuna Indians used it to ease toothache. The Cherokee valued it for treating oral problems, fever, indigestion, asthma, urinary ailments, dysentery and skin disorders and they also prescribed it to cause vomiting. Chippewa Indians took it for some heart problems, and the Micmac, Malecite and Potawatomi tribes (as well as some of the Chippewa Indians) used it to ease diarrhoea. Some of the Chippewa tribe valued it as a treatment for lung disorders, blood ailments and venereal disease. Delaware Indians took it to ease coughs, and they and the Cherokee turned to it for curing hoarseness. Both the Cherokee and Rappahannock took it as a tonic, and the latter also relied upon it for enhancing appetite.

The pale reddish-brown wood from this tree (which is considered to be of high quality) has been used for general construction as well as for heavy building works, beams and piling. In addition it has provided material for building interiors, and for making furniture. It has also been used for veneering, boarding, flooring and pulp, as well as for making railway sleepers, fence posts and coffins, and has been burnt as fuel.

Red oak was adopted as an emblem by both Prince Edward Island in Canada (the Country's smallest province) and by the state of New Jersey in the United States, the latter in 1950. The tree is not only tolerant of salt spray on coastal sites but also urban air pollution and seems to be popular in cultivation (initially, it is believed in 1724). It has been grown for its shade and ornamental value on college campuses and golf courses, as well as on lawns, in parks and in streets.

This oak was introduced to Britain in about 1739 by the highly respected American botanist, John Bartram (1699-1777). In Europe it has been cultivated not only for its timber and the shelter it can offer but also as an ornamental.

Deer, including elk and moose, will browse on the foliage, as will hares and rabbits. Some bears gorge themselves on the acorns, which are also eaten by deer and raccoons, and apart from domestic pigs, various rodents such as squirrels, chipmunks and mice. They are also enjoyed by many birds including songbirds, many kinds of duck, and other birds such as turkeys, pheasants, crows, jays, grouse, woodpeckers, titmice and starlings.

Medicinally, the Negro slaves working in the southern United States turned to the bark for a tonic to ease some female problems. It has been reported that a 19th Century physician of the Eclectic school of that time (he and his colleagues employed herbal medicines for their remedies) believed that the bark in combination with a particular dock (*Rumex*) could be helpful if applied to the skin for treating various disorders or taken internally for some kidney problems. Today it would appear that the bark can sometimes be an ingredient in oral and skin washes, as well as in treatments for piles.