

Quercus suber

CORK OAK is a deciduous or evergreen tree. Native to southern Europe and northern Africa it has deeply-furrowed thick corky bark.

It is also known as *Alcornoque* (Spanish), *Chêne-liège* (French), *Dub korkový* (Czech), *Eiche* (German), *Kork-Eiche* (German), *Korkokverko* (Esperanto), *Quercia sughero* (Italian), *Sobreiro* (Portuguese), *Sobro* (Portuguese), and *Sughera* (Italian).

The bark is carefully peeled off (to avoid damaging the underlying layer) in large 1-2 in. thick sheets every 8-10 years from trees at least 10 years old – and with such care the productive trees will last for centuries.

Suber is Latin (cork) and is also the Latin name for *Quercus suber* (cork oak).

Since Medieval times cork has been used in southern Europe on floors, walls and ceilings – both as a warm surface in Winter and protection from heat in Summer. Portugal's cork oak forests supply over half the world's current demands and her production has trebled in the last 50 years despite substantial quantities that are also being exported from her neighbour, Spain.

It is alleged that cork wine bottle stoppers were first used in the 17th Century by the Benedictine monks in their abbey in northern France at Hautvillers. The cork for these is believed to have come from Spain and catalysed the development of the cork industry there.

The bark is used commercially today for bottle corks, tiles, insulation, floats and the central core of cricket balls. The cork is ground for an ingredient in linoleum and it was once used for filter cigarettes.

In the Autumn Iberian pig farmers pay a fee to allow their animals to graze on the acorns in the forests (most of which are state-owned) for 6-8 weeks. The fee is calculated on the weight of each pig before and after it has feasted.

Suddenly however it seemed that the *dehesa* (the Spanish name for the woodland where the cork oak grows) was under threat – not from over-harvesting but under-harvesting – sufficiently so that the problem even featured in one of the British national news broadcasts just before Christmas 1998. Modern innovations now include the plastic cork or bottle stopper. Those who would promote this seemingly innocuous invention say that it is not only more hygienic than the conventional cork but also that its use avoids any problems of mould that can taint the wine. At the beginning of the 21st Century the French have still not converted to the plastic stoppers unlike so many of their foreign competitors and some wine buffs do point out that the traditional cork could be preferable for wines that are to be laid down as the natural cork allows the passage of some oxygen into the bottle – an essential part of the ageing process. While the argument continues (according to the aforementioned news items) the plastic stoppers have already managed to account for 1% of the world market for wine bottle corks. Because of this apparently the cork woodland (which is home to the imperial eagle and a stopover for migratory birds from cooler climates) is shrinking as replanting decreases – and worse, is replaced by olive groves (*Olea europaea*) that local farmers believe will provide a more secure income. The threat to wildlife inhabiting the cork woodland from loss of habitat – there are only 130 pairs of the imperial eagles left in the world – could be dramatic if one remembers the stark, irretrievable change to the Greek countryside recorded centuries ago

when Solon (640 or 638 to 559 BC) the Athenian lawgiver, decreed in the 6th Century BC that olive oil would be the sole Greek agricultural product exported.

Long before the emergence of the modern synthetic dyes the cork oak was also the source of a red pigment that was familiar in the Middle East over 3000 years ago. Both this species and the evergreen oak (*Quercus ilex*) provide food for a cochineal insect (*Coccus ilicis*) – as does the cochineal cactus (*Opuntia cochenillifera*) for another cochineal insect in Middle America. The red ‘fruit’ were harvested, pickled in vinegar and heated to produce the dye. It was only in about 1910 that these ‘fruit’ were identified as a female cochineal insect.

Cork has long been associated with ways of preventing or handling cramp which range in flights of fancy from standing on a cork bath mat to placing corks in various parts of the bed (including under the pillow).