

From tiny acorn to mighty oak

By: Corine Burgess

“Today's mighty oak is just yesterday's nut that held its ground.” –David Icke

Nature constantly amazes me. Take the mighty oak for example. This huge, magnificent species is born from a tiny acorn that plummeted to the forest floor. The small, somewhat insignificant looking acorn finds a place on the ground and begins its journey into becoming one of the largest, strongest trees on the planet.

If left undisturbed, the acorn will germinate and sprout in the spring. But, as with most things in life, to become tough, robust, and useful, the oak's journey will prove long and difficult. In fact, it may take a decade or longer before it begins to provide adequate shade. What we don't see, is what is happening underground. Oak trees can send roots as deep as five feet in their first year of growth. This is what makes them such sturdy, strong trees.

The tiny acorn does face its challenges in early life. Not all acorns sprout, some simply lay dormant upon the forest floor. Others may be dug up by birds, squirrels and other small mammals looking for a snack. Even if they do sprout, deer and rabbits find the new, bright green growth very tasty and will often nibble the sprouts before they have a chance to grow. Those acorns that are fortunate enough to make it past the sprouting stage still have a fight ahead of them. These young trees must compete with nearby plants for space, shade, sunlight, nutrients and water.

Once the slow growing oak begins to make its way to the sunlight, it will gain height and width sending branches in all directions. These strong limbs provide perches for birds and homes and shelter for numerous creatures. The leaves provide oxygen as well as nutrients to the forest floor. Much sought after shade is provided once the oak begins to spread out and begin its quest to be the mightiest tree in the forest.

There are about 600 species of oaks, which are considered any tree or shrub of the genus *Quercus* of the family Fagaceae (beech family). Oaks are cultivated for lumber as well as landscaping. The wood that oak trees produce is strong, durable and has an attractive look to it. The wood has been used for centuries for shipbuilding, railroad ties, barrels, tools and furniture. Even the bark has many uses. Some species of oak bark has been used for medicinal purposes. Oak bark is also used in tanning and for various dyes. Acorns that the oak produces are used as animal feed, tannin, oil and even food.

One of the most wonderful factors about these trees is that you can grow your own! It's fairly simple, free, and fun for anyone who appreciates the process of nature. If successful, the reward is limitless since you will have an oak tree that will most likely outlive you and possibly the next generation. Your oak may provide shade in the yard, branches to hang a swing on, limbs to climb, habitat for animals, and beauty for all to enjoy.

Involve your kids or grandchildren; planting an oak provides them with a great opportunity to learn about a tree's life cycle.

How to grow your own oak tree:

source: <http://www.wikihow.com/Grow-an-Oak-Tree-from-an-Acorn>

1. Collect green acorns in early fall. Choose ones that are free of worms, holes, and fungus. Ideally, the acorns should be brown or nearly black.
2. Put the green acorns in a bucket of water for a couple minutes. Discard any acorns that float.
3. Take out the remaining acorns. Place them in a large zipper bag with damp sawdust; you should be able to fit up to 250 acorns in these bags. Put them in the refrigerator for a month or longer, as needed to germinate the new oak. This process is known as stratification, which is simply having a seed exposed to cold temperatures. This primes the seed for sprouting in the spring.
4. Keep an eye on their growth. The root end will begin to crack through around early December (late fall, early winter). Once the root has cracked through, the acorn is ready to be planted.
5. Plant each acorn in 2 inch diameter pot deep enough so the tap root can grow. Place the acorn about 2-4 inches below the surface with the root facing down. Water regularly.
6. If preferred, just bury the root, and gently tuck the acorn to one side on top of suitable rich, soft soil. This will only work if the tap root is already well established, long, and has detached adequately from the acorn.
7. After the oak has grown about four inches, which should take less than six months, it can be planted into the ground. In the meantime, continue to care for it in its potted environment. Ideally, the containers should have holes in the bottom that allow for drainage.
 - a. Alternatively, the acorns can be planted directly into the ground by clearing a 2x2 foot area and placing two acorns into that space, with one or two inches of soil on top.
 - b. The circle should have full access to sunlight and good soil.
 - c. Lay a mulch of bark chip about one foot around the tree, but make sure it does not touch the stems.
 - d. In the middle, dig a hole about a foot or two deep and a foot wide.
 - e. Place the oak seedling into the hole, sloping the soil away from the seedling so that the water does not sit at the trunk of the tree. Oaks do not like water sitting on their trunks.
 - f. Next, pack down the earth and water the seedling. Watch it grow over the years!