

The majestic Live Oak

The picturesque scene of the majestic Live Oak with its branches spread across the sky, adorned with Spanish Moss, brings to mind a vision of the South. A symbol of strength, this ancient tree is a striking addition to any landscape. Included in the many benefits this strong and mighty tree offers are shade, shelter, food for wildlife and other plants, timber, fuel, and beauty.

The name “Live Oak” is derived from the fact that these trees are evergreen and remain “live” all through the winter. When other trees are dormant and leafless, these trees continue to add a touch of green to an otherwise dull and gray landscape.

Widely used in early American shipbuilding, the Live Oak’s short height and low hanging branches made ideal lumber for parts of the hulls of ships. It provided a strength which was lacking in other types of wood. The frame of the USS Constitution was constructed from Live Oak wood and survived many a cannon ball which earned it the name “Old Ironsides.”

Live Oaks vary from shrubby to very large and spreading. When in the open, they may grow to be 50 feet in height and span over 150 feet. The tree may have branches that curve to the ground and then go back up again, giving it an unusual shapely look. Live Oaks are a favorite of many children who hang swings from the strong branches and climb the mighty limbs which often touch the ground. The early Native Americans would often bend saplings over so that they would grow at extreme angles to serve as trail markers.

Being strong trees, they can grow in moist or dry sites and withstand occasional floods and hurricanes. They may even survive fire because often the flames will not reach up to their tall crowns. Even if the tree gets burned, its strong roots may allow it to survive and sprout vigorously after the fire has vanished.

Animals depend of the Live Oak as well. These trees provide an important food source for the Bobwhite Quail, the Florida Scrub Jay, the Wood Duck, Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker, Wild Turkey, Black Bear, and various species of squirrel and, of course, the white-tailed deer. It also provides shelter and nesting sites for many critters. Native Americans used the tree for a food source as well and were known to extract oil from the acorns the tree produces.

The leaves are simple and alternately arranged. They are from 2 to 5 inches long and about ½ - 2 ½ inches wide. They are narrow to broadly elliptical shaped and feel stiff and leathery. The upper surface is shiny and dark green in color. The underside of the leaf is grayish green. The acorns are about 1 inch long, broad at the base and rounded at the tip. The largest part of the fruit is generally a shiny, dark brown and the nut portion, which is under the cap, is usually light brown. The dark brown bark is thick with furrows and rough ridges.

Many epiphytic plants depend on the Live Oak for their survival. Epiphytes are plants that grow upon another plant (such as a tree) non-parasitically or sometimes upon some other object (such as a building or a telegraph wire), derive their moisture and nutrients from the air and rain and sometimes from debris accumulating around it, and are found in tropical regions. Often called air plants, they make their homes in the crooks and crannies of the oaks. One of the most

common scenes depicted in southern photos and paintings is the Live Oak decked out with the weeping garlands of Spanish Moss.

Care of the Live Oak is very easy. It requires very little water even when young. After it reaches a height of about 5 feet, it shouldn't have to be watered at all. These trees live a long time – some reaching a ripe old age of over 1,000 years. What the oak does require however, is lots of space. Being a large tree, it will spread over an entire yard if given the room.

Live Oak is just one of the many plants that will be offered during our Air Potato Exchange Day on January 9th from 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. at the Agricultural Center in Sebring. All you have to do is bring in a minimum of one bag of air potato bulbs and we'll give you your choice of a free native plant. We are able to do this because we have acquired funds from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council – Kathy Craddock Burks education grant to purchase native plants. Find out more by giving me a call at (863) 402-6545 or visit our website at www.highlandsswcd.org.