

Tree species identification is important for many reasons, but none more so than whitetail preference. Deer almost always target white oak acorns rather than red oak species. This is entirely because of taste. Acorns have varying levels of tannin (tannic acid), within the nut. White oaks tend to have much lower levels than red oaks, which translates to a sweeter taste in the former and a more bitter offering in the latter. Because of that wide range in tannin, whitetails clean up dropped white oak acorns within days, whereas it can be weeks or months before they consume all red oak acorns.

Another reason to know your oaks is mast production frequency. You need to time the mast crop drop. White oak trees take one year to mature and produce a ready-to-drop acorn. Red oak trees require two years to do so. Knowing where these trees are on your hunting property and what year they'll likely drop acorns can help you make better hunting decisions. Keep a log of this to predict future deer movements.

Finally, if you manage land, planting oak trees is important. Acorns are low in protein (about 6 to 8 percent) and aren't what deer need in spring and summer. However, they are high in carbs (about 40 to 45 percent) and fats (about 50 to 55 percent), which is what deer need through fall and winter. Understanding the nutritional value of oaks, where various species thrive and the timing of their mast crop drop are important factors.

OAK TREE IDENTIFICATION

Oak tree species fall into one of two families, including red and white oaks. These can be identified in four ways. Study the leaf, bark, acorn and tree location to help determine the species.

Leaves: Generally, white oak species have leaves with rounded lobes without spines at the tips. In contrast, red oak species have leaves with more pointed lobes with spines near the tips. You'll notice a stark difference between these.

Bark: In most cases, white oaks have a rough, light-colored bark. This tends to remain so from the base, up the trunk and out the limbs. Red oaks might have rough bark at the base, but it tends to get much smoother as it moves up the trunk and out the limbs.



KNOWING YOUR OAKS

Woodsmanship is a dying art, but one way to revive it — and your deer hunting success — is to learn your oak trees.

■ by Josh Honeycutt



■ Oaks are important to deer and deer hunting, especially when it comes to understanding and taking advantage of seasonal shifts.



THE NEW OAK TREE

🌿 Folks who like oak trees for whitetails will love chestnut trees. A blight largely caused these to go extinct in North America, but the species is finally making a comeback. Thanks to a hybrid species of American and Chinese chestnut trees, this new variation is close to the original American chestnut but has just enough Chinese chestnut genetics to be resistant to the blight. And deer love them. Studies suggest whitetails even prefer these rather than white oak acorns.

Acorns: White oak trees have very small acorns, which can be almost circular. Red oaks have larger acorns that are more oblong.

Location: Although this is the worst identification tool, each oak species tends to grow and be more common in certain locations, which depends on conditions.

SPECIES TO KNOW

Being able to identify the difference between red and white oak tree species is great, but there are many subspecies within these families hunters should know about. Check out some of the most common ones, with markers (R for red oak, W for white oak) designating which line of the family tree they belong to.

Black oak (R): This species is common throughout parts of the Midwest, Mid-South and Northeast. It's similar to the red oak and falls into the same family. However, it has very dark bark, which gives it its name. This is among the tallest of the oak species.

Bur oak (W): Common throughout the Midwest and parts of the East, this tree is known for burly, gnarly bark and

branches. However, it can be difficult to transplant.

Cherry bark oak (R): This tree is abundant in south central and southeastern states. It does well in high-moisture soils, making it common in low-lying areas. It can surpass 100 feet in height.

Chinquapin oak (W): This is a mainstay in midwestern and southeastern states. It grows in a diverse range of soils and can frequently be found in dryer areas or well-drained soils that receive significant moisture. This tree generally doesn't surpass 70 feet.

Live oak (R): This tree is confined to the South and doesn't do well in colder climates. However, where it thrives, it tends to have a long lifespan. It's known for its long, flowing limb structure.

Nuttall oak (R): These are common in bottomland hardwoods. However, they prefer areas that drain well, too. Nuttalls are tolerant of diseases, insects, wet soil and moderate drought and grow quickly.

Overcup oak (W): Native along the Atlantic coast states, this is a swamp-based tree. It grows at a moderate rate and can reach 70 feet. Wildlife tends to like its small, tasty acorns.

Pin oak (R): This is a very hardy, tolerant tree. Its acorn is moderate in tannic acid, making it an average food source choice for deer and other wildlife.

Post oak (W): This is a medium-sized tree, commonly reaching 50 feet, and is common in the South. It's especially common throughout eastern Texas. This is a great source of food for whitetails.

Red oak (R): Commonly referred to as the northern red oak, this is one of the most common oak species in the country. It does well in various environments and is even drought tolerant. It's also among the fastest growing in the oak family.

Sawtooth oak (R): This is a non-native species from Asia. That said, it produces a lot of acorns, which can be good for deer and other animals. It also drops acorns early, which is great for archery season openers. But when other oak species begin dropping, such as white oaks, sawtooth oak acorns might be ignored.

Scarlet oak (R): This tree is common throughout the eastern United States and does well in dryer soils. It can also handle higher levels of soil toxicity and prefers sunlight. This is a large tree and can reach 100 feet.

PLANTING YOUR OWN OAKS

Some land managers might prefer to plant their own oak trees.

Although there's much more to it, this provides some information to start with:

1. You can buy expensive commercial offerings. Or, if you're good at identifying species, collect some fresh, local acorns to plant.
2. Local acorns are sometimes more resistant to the conditions and diseases than commercial blends.
3. Place each acorn in a bowl of water to test the quality. Those that sink are likely in good shape. Those that float likely won't germinate.
4. Place acorns in a marked bag with a damp paper towel (keep it that way), and store them in a refrigerator throughout winter. These need to remain in cold storage for 40 to 50 days.
5. Place sprouting acorns in a pot with soil. Keep the soil moist but not too wet, or it can cause the acorns to rot.
6. Pots can be placed outdoors when the seedlings sprout and the fear of freezing is done. Locate them in partial shade. This will help them acclimate to the sun.
7. Keep the seedlings in a large pot for about one growing season. (Don't allow the root system to outgrow the pot.) Then, when the seedling is about 2 to 3 feet tall and the leaves have emerged again, it's time to plant.
8. Choose an optimal location for your planting. For most species, this should be a well-drained area that still retains moist soil.
9. Dig a hole that's twice the size of the root wad. Don't place trees too close together.
10. Use tubes to ensure a straight-growing tree. Consider necessary precautions to prevent wildlife from browsing young trees.

Shingle oak (R): This is a common tree throughout the Midwest. It does OK in dryer soils. However, it prefers moist but well-drained soil conditions. This tree can reach 70 feet.

Shumard oak (R): This species is less common but exists in greater quantities throughout the South. It's one of the least predictable when attempting to gauge the acorn drop timeline and often drops very late. This can make it an excellent late-season hunting spot.

Swamp chestnut oak (W): This tree primarily exists in wet to moderate soils and is generally located in bottomlands. It can also tolerate poor drainage. It produces very large acorns, which drop later than many other species.

Swamp white oak (W): This tree gets its name from its geographical preference. It does well in areas of poorly drained soil. This is the reason for its prevalence in swampy areas. That said, it still produces a small, tasty acorn like other white oak species.

Water oak (R): This is a big tree, commonly found in lowlands, and can grow to nearly 100 feet. You might also find it near other waterways, such as ponds, creeks and streams.

White oak (W): This is the favored species of whitetails. Its acorns are sweeter and offer great nutrients. This tree does well on high ground and even down in the bottoms, so long as the soil is well-drained.

Willow oak (R): This tree tends to grow well in wetter soils and can even tolerate occasional, mild flooding. It's great to have, especially given the timing of the acorn drop. It tends to fall after sawtooth acorns but before the white oak species.

HUNTING AROUND OAK TREES

All things considered, oak trees are incredibly important to deer and deer hunting. Recognizing them and understanding when they drop acorns is pivotal in how deer use and maneuver through the landscape. Being one step ahead of whitetails as they shift to each of these all-important food sources can help you fill tags this season. All thanks to knowing your oaks.

