

Black Oak

Quercus velutina

Common name:

Black Oak

Pronunciation:

KWER-kus ve-LU-ti-na

Family:

Fagaceae

Genus:

Quercus

"Too often, the trunks are short and crooked, knotty, cracked even in the living tree As part of the hard, untamed, original sylva, it has a rough, unbending grandeur of its own ... in the scraggly outline of its bare branches against the skyline of the mountain ridge, in the paint of its autumn foliage, in the color of its inner bark."

"In the old days, before the invention of aniline dyes, the intense yellow color [of the inner bark] ... was an important article of commerce, and native weavers may still use it in the Appalachian coves."

(excerpts from Donald Culross Peattie, A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America)

Quick ID Tips

- Leaves usually have 5-7 pointed lobes (occasionally 9) separated by deep, U-shaped notches (sinuses)
- Very dark bark with deeply furrowed vertical strips broken into blocks by horizontal ridges and furrows; inner bark orange or yellow
- Buds are covered almost entirely with whitish fuzz
- Acorns are about 1/3 to 1/2 enclosed in a scaly cap
- NOTE: Identification of oaks in the red/black oak group is often very difficult due to the tendency to hybridize and due to variability of leaves on a single tree.

Details

- Deciduous tree grows up to 60 ft. high, occasionally to 100 ft. or more, variable spread, narrow or wide, often an open crown.
- Bark dark brown, inner bark orange or yellow.

- Leaves simple, alternate, ovate to oblong, 4-8" long and 2-4" wide, 7-9 bristle-tipped lobes, leathery. Upper leaf surface is glossy dark green; lower surface is more yellowish-brown and often glabrous except in the axils of veins.
- Width of leaf between opposite sinuses at midrib is variable but is approximately 1/2 total width of leaf - less than red oak and wider than pin or scarlet oak.
- Leaves turn red or orange-brown in fall.
- Catkins with small flowers emerge in spring at same time as the leaves emerge.
- Fruit is a short-stalked, ovoid acorn less than 1" long, enclosed about half by a dome-like cup having light brown, downy scales.
- In forest stands, black oak begins to produce acorns at about age 20 and reaches optimum production at 40 to 75 years. It is a consistent seed producer with good crops of acorns every 2 to 3 years, known as masting years.
- The number of seeds that become available for regenerating black oak may be low even in good seed years. Insects, squirrels, deer, turkey, small rodents, and birds consume many acorns. They can eat or damage a high percentage of the acorn crop in most years and essentially all of it in poor seed years.
- Black oaks prefer sun and are intermediate in tolerance to shade like red and scarlet oaks, but are less shade tolerant than white and chestnut oak, hickories, beech, maples, elm, and tupelo. Black oak grows best on middle and lower slopes with northerly and easterly aspects and cool, moist, well-drained acid soils. It is found at elevations up to 3,900 ft.
- Along with other oaks, black oaks are attacked by the spongy moth (*Lymantria dispar*), formerly known as the gypsy moth. Black oaks can withstand a single defoliation, but two or three defoliations in successive years will kill many trees.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 3-9. Native range extends from Maine to Florida, west to Minnesota and eastern Texas.



upper side of leaf



lower side of leaf



leaves, fall



trunk, bark



winter twigs, buds

Sources:

- Oregon State University Landscape Plants, <https://landscapeplants.oregonstate.edu/plants/quercus-velutina>
- David Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Trees* (Knopf 2009)