

## Oak Open Days - France 24-26 September 2004

---

**Béatrice Chassé**

Arboretum des Pouyouleix  
St. Jory de Chalais, France

A documentary-producer friend of mine, after listening to my verbal account of this my first oak journey (Oak Open Days, France 24-26 September), said, "This is incredible... who would have thought... we'll have to film this one day." So, if his second-hand, completely vicarious experience of this is that exciting, you can well imagine what it was like for me to be there.

Was it that this mixture of "professionals" and "amateurs" projected us back to a time when science, botany in particular, flourished in large part due to the close collaboration of those two groups? Was it the stimulus provided by the feeling that never in a million years could one know oaks as well as certain of those present? Or just the sight of so many incredible, botanical marvels? the passionate discussions? The freedom and satisfaction of being able to ask all your questions... and always get good answers?

### **An oak by any other name**

Stéphane Brame, Allen Coombes, Eike Jablonski and Thierry Lamant huddled in consultation, agreeing or disagreeing with the name on the label or proposing a name in the absence of the latter, is perhaps not just an epiphenomenon of taxonomic deficiencies or systematic incoherencies. It seemed rather the perfect illustration of what it means to be an oak tree. If all classification systems are a synthetic view of man's understanding of life, maybe the genus *Quercus* is trying to tell us something!



The author, Beatrice Chassé, measuring the height of a tree

photo © Eike Jablonski



The tour organizer, Thierry Lamant

photo © Eike Jablonski

Antoine le Hardy de Beaulieu pointed out to me, and he certainly has seen a great number of individuals of a great number of species of oak, that even when an oak tree does very well outside of its natural zone, differences in leaf, habit, etc... are almost always expressed.

Perhaps then, the most important thing I have come away with after these Oak Open Days, is a greater appreciation of the incredible plasticity of these trees and an even firmer conviction that while genetics can deepen our understanding of many things, many of its deterministic paradigms hinder rather than help.

### **Le Jardin des Plantes**

Louis XVI said, walking up the flight of stairs that were to be his last, "A-t-on des nouvelles de Lapérouse?" ("Do we have any news from Lapérouse?"). Famous last words that mark the importance French monarchs accorded to voyages of discovery and exploration of the world. Though their motives were certainly not of the order of natural history, the impact on botany is nevertheless spectacular: today *le*

*Jardin des Plantes* manages an eight million specimen rich herbarium plus several thousand living plants.

When you plant an oak tree that you know will not be extraordinary - like only oak trees can be extraordinary - until, say, 100 or 150 years have gone by, there is always something astounding about looking at an oak that was planted... 100 or 150 years ago. It buys you a little piece of eternity. Suddenly, a plant opens the door to an otherwise humanly incomprehensible lapse of time.

And so, *le Jardin des Plantes* is awesome if only for this reason: *Quercus haas*, 1855, the first of its kind to be planted in France; *Quercus infectoria*, 1850, the oldest specimen in France today; *Quercus ithaburensis* subsp. *macrolepis*, 1814; *Quercus macrocarpa*, 1811, that we did not see for lack of time - so you all must go back to *le Jardin des Plantes*!

On one of the corners of *l'Allée Alfred Lacroix* (I think) can be found an interesting specimen of *Quercus myrsinaefolia*. As I have only ever seen it growing as a tree, here at last was a *Quercus myrsinaefolia* that looked like a *Myrsine* shrub border.

Before leaving *le Jardin des Plantes*, Michel Avishai, generously distributed the acorns he had come with: *Quercus ithaburensis*, *Quercus alnifolia*, *Quercus look* and *Quercus libani*. These are the first acorns that I will attempt to grow. Sincerest thanks to you, Michael Avishai. Other acorns that were distributed during our voyage were *Q. copayensis*, *Q. costa-ricensis*, *Q. seemanii* and *Q. insignis*, from Christian Spinelli (Costa Rica) and *Q. salicina*, *Q. serrata* and *Q. acuta* from Shaun Haddock (France).



French "Farewell" at Arboretum LeCoulèes, with owner Michael Angeard serving the wine

photo © Eike Jablonski



*Q. afares* in the Arboretum National Des Barres. This specimen was introduced from Algeria in 1880.

photo © Eike Jablonski

### Les Coulées

Leaving *le Jardin des Plantes*, our next stop was 250 km to the southwest, near the city of Angers at the Arboretum, *Les Coulées*. Our host, Michel Angeard, an immediately likeable individual, with a sort of mad-scientist look about him, began planting here about 30 years ago.

As a scientist, Michel Angeard began by taking core samples across his 40 acres to have a good overview of the different soil conditions present. To a certain extent, he organised which plants would go where based on this information. But, as an artist (painter and sculptor), the planting was also based on pure aesthetic inspiration and the desire to create a pleasant garden with nice surprises around every corner.

His first passion with botany was with the genus *Rosa*. He planted over 450 species/varieties of roses - that today have graciously receded their dominion as the trees he had planted grew. Their presence is still largely felt with numerous species that have clung on to life while often clinging to the trees, rising five, six or more metres from the ground and flowering abundantly. Among the many other notable species: *Rosa palustris* (a rose with no thorns), *Rosa sericea omeinsis* f. *pteracantha* (with beautiful translucent red thorns), *R. pimpinellifolia* (with dark purple, black hips).

There are many, many different kinds of trees at *Les Coulées*: oaks, maples, willows, ashes, alders, horse chestnut, and more, not to mention the coniferous species. But there are 200 oak trees, the majority of which are American along with numerous cultivars, mostly European. Michel admits to having a weakness for the American oaks because of their wonderful colour transformations. He has no par-

ticular personal explanation for his passion for oak trees. He attributes it to the mythology of the oak tree: majestic and charged with history, as well as to the fact that it is a dominant element of the natural environment that he has grown up with.

There are so many oak trees to see at *Les Coulées* that I am somewhat at a loss to point out one or another from anything other than a purely anecdotal point of being mislabelled; *Q. graciliformis*, *Q. rysophylla* and *Q. macranthera*, because I had never seen any of them; *Q. lobata*, in quite good health, although many say that this tree is usually unhappy in this part of the world; *Q. pagoda* with bright reddish-pink leaves, because mine were still green; *Q. macranthera* 'Fastigiata', because I didn't even know that it existed!

In style, Michel and his wife Simone bid us farewell with numerous bottles of a regional wine called *chaumes* and wonderful *hors-d'œuvres* hot out of the oven. Just what we needed to keep us going after a long, too-many-things-seen, too-much-information-to-absorb, day. A quick ride to our hotel near Angers, and as Caroline Brown (from California) said to me, our daily programme of walk, walk, walk, walk, talk, talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat, eat, sleep, was entering its final stages.

### L'Arboretum Gaston Allard (Angers)

M. Gaston Allard started planting in this arboretum, now run by the city of Angers, about 150 years ago.

Having read, as many of you I am sure, the Proceedings of the Fourth International Oak Conference (Fall 2003, Winchester, England), I was eager to see M. Gaston Allard's famous "trademark" as explained by Thierry Lamant: "...trees planted high, not being fully inserted into the soil, so that the upper part of the root system is exposed." A good lesson to learn: there are 50 ways to make chocolate mousse, and most of them are quite good. So what is the essential ingredient?

Probably the most spectacular thing I saw during this trip was here: an alley of enormous *Q. frainetto* and *Q. palustris* (planted in 1875). Some of these trees are 25 m tall and the effect is astounding. There is also a very large *Quercus suber* (80 cm in diameter) - the sole survivor of this species here after the harsh winter of 1985/86. A very beautiful specimen of *Quercus ilex*, with numerous young *ilex* having germinated underneath, attracted my attention. Various cultivars of this species can also be seen here.

A remarkable 35 m tall *Quercus x schochiana* (a natural hybrid between *Q. phellos* and *Q. palustris*) was the backdrop to a very interesting conversation with M. Hervé LeBouler that started with different methods of propagating oaks that he has been studying in his experimental nursery for several years and that ended with a general discussion about taxonomy and the evolutionary biology of oaks in particular.

There is a very large specimen of *Torreya taxifolia*, which Thierry explained is an endangered species in its natural environment.

### La Forêt Domaniale de Bercé

A two and a half hour bus ride to the north west (with lunch in the middle) brought us to *la Forêt Domaniale de Bercé*, (3000 hectares of oak - *Quercus petraea* - and 2400 hectares of pine) for a guided tour of what is considered to be one of the best run forests in France. The oak trees live to be... 240 years old before they are cut down. Well, of course, not all of them, but certainly enough of them to create that

unique atmosphere that only comes from a deciduous forest with very, very old, rather tall trees.

The forest is managed on the principle that every year 12.5 hectares must be exploited and regenerated. The old trees provide the seed and are eliminated progressively to leave space for the young trees. It takes about ten years to complete view: a magnificent *Q. rugosa*, which I was very proud to correctly identify without hesitation; a tree labelled, *Q. acerifolia*, which I was very proud to identify as this cycle and so it is estimated that approximately 125 hectares are permanently in the progress of being exploited/regenerated.

Since the winter of 1999/2000 and the great storms that swept across France destroying uncountable hectares (140 million cubic metres of wood) there is great controversy (both political and ecological) over how forests have been and should be managed. There is much criticism regarding today's policy makers' accused of paying little real attention to sound ecological principles while basing decisions primarily on commercial considerations. As often is the case...

### Arboretum National des Barres

Considered to be one of the crown jewels of French botanical gardens, this arboretum is located in the village of *Nogent sur Vernisson*, near the city of *Orléans*. One of three arboreta created by the very wealthy and powerful Vilmorin family, the botanical collections at *Les Barres* cover about 40 hectares. The national collection of oak trees is here: 83 botanical species and 18 cultivars and hybrids.

The only specimen outside of China of *Quercus gracilis* can be found here - except that it shouldn't be called *Q. gracilis*, but *Q. liboensis* ! In 1998, Professor Zhou Zhekun, visited *Les Barres* specifically to verify the dubious identity of this tree which, at the time, was labelled, *Quercus oxyodon*. Fruiting only three times between 1995 and 2001, our voyage was definitely blessed: Eike Jablonski found

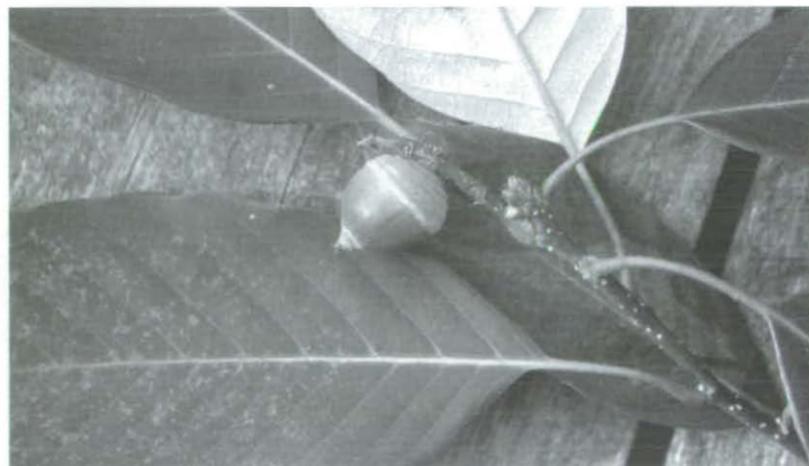


photo © Eike Jablonski

*Q. liboensis* (or *Q. gracilis*). Raised from seed collected by Father Paul Farges in 1901, this rare Chinese species is found in the wild only in a small reserve in Kweichow, and this is the only cultivated specimen outside China. In one hundred years, only six acorns have been found on this tree!

an acorn! Today, unfortunately, *Quercus oxyodon* is still the name that visitors will read, and the *Quercus gracilis/Quercus liboensis* taxonomical battle is apparently not quite resolved.

Alongside a curious hybrid - with no label - between *Quercus cerris* and *Quercus no-one-was-quite-sure*, Michael Avishal explained that *Quercus afares*, *castaneifolia* and *cerris* all have a common origin but have differentiated with time and their geographical distribution. We all had the opportunity to admire a beautiful *Quercus afares* planted in 1920 with a trunk measuring, today, 2.50 m in diameter.

Throughout our journey I was quite distressed by many *Quercus nigra* representatives that we saw because the leaves definitely did not resemble the leaves of my *Quercus nigra* specimens. Thierry Lamant tried to reassure me saying that it was only a question of age. Thank goodness here at last was a fairly young one and the leaves were exactly like mine!

There is a remarkable stand of *Quercus ilicifolia* (half an hectare, planted in 1828 on the outskirts of the park). The trees are impressively tall for this species, 6.5 metres for example, much taller than in their natural habitat. Allen Coombes was quite interested in collecting acorns from a specimen that was not far from a *Quercus rubra* in hopes of being able to obtain a *Quercus x fernaldi*. As all of us frantically collected those pretty little acorns with their distinctive pink-orange spot, perhaps one day one of us will be able to exhibit this apparently very hard to find hybrid.

*Q. aliena* (planted in 1929, 15 m); *Q. myrsinaefolia* (planted in 1931, 10 m); *Q. palustris* (35 m); *Q. x hickelli* (first-known specimen of this hybrid between *Q. petraea* and *Q. pontica*); *Q. baronii* (the only one present in any European collection); *Q. x vilmoriniana* (the first specimen of this artificial hybrid between *Q. dentata* and *Q. petraea*)...

There are many magnificent trees here - and not just oaks - but, I must say, the overwhelming impression is that they are all planted much too near to one another and so, especially when they are old, it is difficult to really see them. Additionally, many labels are missing or, what is worse, incorrect. I do not wish to belittle those who - past or present - have devoted their time and energy into maintaining the aesthetic and botanical interest of the place, but the present state of affairs is a bit distressing.

One can buy plants at *Les Barres*: of the 22 species of *Quercus* present in the catalogue for 2004, the general origin - United States - of only 4 of them is indicated. A year or so ago, at the beginning of my interest in this genus, I tried to find out how many species and which ones were in the *Quercus* national collection. When I finally managed to speak to someone who would talk to me about this, I was told that this information could not be given out to the public...! At the time I laughed at what I took to be yet another mystery of French bureaucracy, but, very sadly, one has to ask: what is going on here?

## In conclusion

One of the most interesting voyages of discovery I have ever been a part of; it was a shame that it only lasted two and a half days. Two and a half weeks would have been better! I can't wait for the next opportunity to participate in such an adventure and wish to thank all of my new *Quercus*-lover friends for the wonderful moments spent together.