
DYNAMICS OF SELECTED EASTERN NORTH AMERICAN OAKS

by Curt Hanson

My interest in oaks goes back to early childhood, as my father instilled in me a deep respect of the forest. To him, all trees were sacred, understandably, as he grew up in the flat, treeless cornfields of central Illinois. Acorns have always had a magical quality to me, and I have fond memories of collecting the shiny, brown nuggets of *Quercus montana* with emerging roots.

The 'Big Oak', a huge *Quercus rubra* overlooking the shores of Lake Erie, was a favorite rendezvous spot for our gang. The 'Lookout Oak' (*Q. palustris*) was a tall sentinel we could climb like a ladder and sit for hours watching the neighborhood.

By ninth grade I had discovered a huge swamp white oak (*Q. bicolor*) and a few gnarly bur oaks (*Q. macrocarpa*), which opened to me a new world involving many "species" and the concept of biodiversity.

Northern Ohio is still quite rich with temperate forests. Walking in these woods, where species interface and create hybrid forms, was like observing the process of evolution first hand, about as close as we can come to travelling through time.

The diversity of species that fill every nook and cranny of our world awes our imagination. Nature inspires us and teaches us patience and humility, realizing that we are such a minute part of this timeless continuum.

Oaks are the dynamic sculptural monarchs of our temperate forests. Each has its own unique personality, shaped by heredity and its environment; proud sentinels which bear silent witness to a century or more of history. Yet now this seemingly timeless and sacred world is changing. As mankind continues to expand, our forests are deteriorating. And along with the wilderness goes the places where our spirits can soar, and however brief, we see a glimpse of a reality bigger than ourselves. These fleeting moments are what inspire hope and instill a deeper sense of meaning to our lives.

As the seconds tick by, our forests, acre by acre, disappear and the world becomes less a realm of magic and beauty, but one of controlled calculated commodities. Our changing environment, not immediately obvious to the eye, manifests in subtle, yet continuous loss: a swamp devoid of salamanders; the absence of a particular bird song; symptoms of a general breakdown. Like a man who is stressed becomes susceptible to pneumonia, our forests lack the vitality to combat pathogens. Beech canker and oak wilt may take these forest trees down the path of the elm and chestnut. Our new Society must address some of these issues which threaten these trees.

I encourage you all to plant acorns. But the time is getting late, and we must review our basic relationship with nature itself if our children's children are to have any mighty oaks to climb.

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