

Tip of the Month

February *Among the Oaks*

Every year in February, Portola Valley begins its most vibrant season: bud break among our deciduous oaks. These are the species that put on a show in the coming weeks and that, with proper care, give us cooling shade through the heat of summer.

Black oaks (*Quercus kelloggii*) lead the charge with a shock of pink that quickly fades to a rich green as they unfurl large leaves with softly pointed tips. While their native range stretches from Oregon to Baja, black oaks are relatively uncommon in town; they prefer lighter soils and better drainage than is typical of our local sticky clay. Where they do occur, they may be most recognizable in fall, when a cold snap can turn their leaves a golden yellow.



Valley oaks (*Q. lobata*) are often the second to emerge, revealing deeply lobed emerald green leaves that develop a blue-ish cast as the temperatures rise. This tree is most often found low in the valley, where it enjoys deeper soils and access to ground water. This is the largest species of oak in North America, and is endemic to (doesn't naturally occur outside of) California. It is best known as the oak that towers over the rich alluvial soils and agricultural fields of the Central Valley and, more locally, for the two heritage oaks that preside over Dorothy Ford Park.



Blue oaks (*Q. douglasii*) bide their time before emerging; some long-time residents claim that you can set your calendar by the emergence of their leaves on March 15. This is arguably California's scrappiest oak, tolerant of intense heat, drought and shallow soils throughout its range, which traces a ring in the foothills around the Central Valley. Its small leaves emerge a vibrant green that fade to its namesake blue-green as they develop a stiff, waxy protective layer.



Oak Health

Respect the roots

Disturbance to an oak tree's root zone can cause damage that may take months or years to reveal itself. Some trees may never show visible signs before they suddenly fail or die. Because of this delayed response, contractors, mow and blow gardeners and even landscape architects frequently do not realize or understand the impact of their work on tree health, and may unknowingly recommend or perform work that is severely damaging. To maintain healthy trees, it is critical to take proper care of an oak's root zone. Follow these tips for all of our native oaks - not just the deciduous species - and always consult with an arborist before performing significant work beneath a tree's canopy.

- Maintain a thick layer of oak leaf mulch; allowing a tree's leaves to decompose beneath its canopy retains moisture and supports an entire ecosystem that cycles nutrients back to the tree.
- Protect soil from compaction; roots "breathe" in the soil, and when soil is compressed by vehicles, construction, or even by our feet, there is less room for air. This is especially true of wet clay soil.
- Minimize soil disturbance; trees take in air, water and nutrients through fine root hairs. Even if you don't see any "large" roots, you are damaging roots when you dig a trench or install plants under the canopy.
- Don't bury the root flare; a tree's trunk naturally flares at its base as it transitions to roots. If this flare gets buried, moisture held against the trunk can increase an oak's susceptibility to pests and disease.
- Avoid summer irrigation; while many oaks will tolerate and even appear to thrive for a time with summer irrigation, it increases the risk of infection by *Armillaria*, or oak root fungus.

Caring for the Canopy

Wet weather is our cue to put down the saws; pruning cuts are wounds that, like our own cuts and scrapes, take time to heal. During the rainy season, wounds have a higher risk of infection by pathogens, including sudden oak death. Pruning should wait until dry weather and - ideally - until most birds have finished nesting, in September.

Sources and additional information:

<https://www.feis-crs.org/feis/>

<https://selectree.calpoly.edu/>

<https://www.calflora.org/>

<https://calscape.org/>

https://phytosphere.com/SODmgtPUB/pg51_3_2_SODmgtpub.htm