

Horticulture News

January/February 2013

Common Oaks of Florida

by Nancy P. Arny

This document describes characteristics of the oak species common to Florida, as well as some that are not so common.

Background

The nineteen species of oaks native to Florida are a small segment of the beech family (*Fagaceae*) which includes beeches, chestnuts, chinkapins and oaks. The oaks (genus *Quercus*) are economically important species worldwide, providing timber for ships, staves for barrels, and lumber for flooring and fine furniture. Corks, tannins and dyes come from oaks, as well as valuable wildlife food in the form of acorns. Oaks have played a significant role in history and religions of the world, marking meeting places of historical figures, providing the strength to fleets of sailing ships and supporting the sacred mistletoe of the druids.

Oaks provide excellent fuelwood to heat our

homes and deep shade to cool them in the summer. They are excellent landscaping trees, many exhibiting brilliant autumn foliage while others remain leafy green throughout the winter. While there is significant variation among species, their wood is generally strong and durable. On good sites, oaks grow relatively quickly, providing landscape and shade values within five to ten years. Some species, including water oak are relatively short-lived. White oaks over 300 years old are not unusual and live oaks over 500 years old have been documented.

Over 300 species of oaks worldwide are divided into two groups: the white oaks and the red (or sometimes black) oaks. The white oak group includes species with acorns that mature in the fall of the year they are formed (annual oaks). White oaks generally have a rounded leaf tip and rounded lobes without bristles. Their acorns

are sweeter than those of the bitter red oak group, making them more palatable to both humans and wildlife. The red oak's leaf lobes are usually pointed or tipped with a fine bristle. Their acorns mature the second year following their formation, leading to the designation as biennial oaks. Oak flowers are fairly inconspicuous, consisting of catkins which appear at the same time as the leaves.

The White Oak Group

Eight members of the white oak group are native to Florida: bluff oak, Chapman oak, chinkapin oak, live oak, overcup oak, post oak, swamp chestnut oak and white oak. Sand post oak, a variety of post oak, also is native to Florida. All have alternately arranged leaves, usually with rounded tips. The inner surface of the acorn shell is smooth and the relatively sweet acorns of white oaks generally germinate in the fall of the year.

Bluff Oak (*Quercus austrina*)

Bluff oak is similar to white oak but generally smaller. As its name implies, bluff oak can be found on riverside bluffs in moist, rich soils. Its leaves are 3-to-8-inches long, usually with five short, rounded lobes; dark green above and lighter underneath. Oval acorns appear singly or in pairs and may be slightly fuzzy near the apex or tip. The cup covers a third to a half of the nut.



Bluff Oak

Bluff oaks have little economic significance but contribute to species diversity of forested areas and provide valuable wildlife food and nesting sites

Chapman Oak (*Quercus chapmanii*)

While Chapman oaks may reach 50 feet in height and exceed 10 or 12 inch diameters, Florida specimens rarely grow beyond shrub height in the dry, sandy scrub ecosystem they inhabit. This oak's narrow, unlobed leaves are silvery green with short, hairy petioles. They are about 3-1/2-inches long. The knobby, warty cups of Chapman acorns cover almost one half of the fruit. Acorns occur singly or in pairs.



Chapman Oak

Chinkapin Oak (*Quercus muehlenbergii*)

The chinkapin oak is found on dry, rocky soil and limestone ridges in the northern U.S. and in deep, rich, valley soil in association with other hardwoods in the southern U.S. It is common throughout the eastern U.S. except on the coastal plain. Chinkapins may reach heights from 60 to 80 feet and diameters of 2 to 3 feet. Crowns are narrow and round-topped and the tree may resemble

a shrub in the northern part of its range.



Chinkapin Oak

Leaves are alternate, simple and deciduous, 4-to-7-inches long and 1-to-4-inches wide. The leaf is wedge-shaped, silvery and pubescent below with a stout yellow midrib. Acorns generally appear singly on the reddish-purple twigs. Pairs do occur. Bark becomes grey as it matures. Acorns are dark-brown-to-black, measuring 3/4-inch in length. A bowl-shaped cap with brown scales covers half of the fruit.

Live Oak (*Quercus virginiana*)

Majestic, moss-draped live oaks reach heights of 40 to 50 feet with trunk diameters of 3-to-4 feet. Their low, massive branches provided naturally formed, angled wood valuable in building the wooden ships of the 1800s. It was for this reason that one of America's first forest reserves was established in the panhandle of Florida. Live oaks are common on sandy soils throughout the state. Their range along the coastal plain extends from Virginia to Texas.



Live Oak

Unlike most other oaks, the live oak retains its leaves until after the following year's leaves have appeared. This habit results in an "evergreen" tree. Leaves are unlobed and rarely toothed: lustrous green above and pale-pubescent on the underside. Leaf length varies from 2-to-5 inches with width ranging from 1/2-to-2-1/2 inches.

Acorns, usually in clusters of three to five, are set on relatively long stalks. The 1-inch long, brownish-black fruit is longer than it is round with almost a third of its length covered by a top-shaped cap. Twigs are gray-brown and smooth. Mature bark is deep red-brown and slightly furrowed with small surface scales. Live oaks are among the more long-lived oaks, frequently achieving ages greater than 200 years.

Overcup Oak (*Quercus lyrata*)

As its name implies, the scales of the cap, or cup, almost entirely enclose the 1/2-to-1-inch-round fruit. Overcup oaks may-- in rare instances-- achieve

heights of 100 feet, but are generally shorter. Trees are frequently twisted and are of little economic value, but provide valuable wildlife habitat in the bottomlands where they abound. They may be found with willows, swamp-chestnut oaks and elms along the coastal plain from New Jersey to Florida and Texas. Their buttressed bases are an adaptation to the wet soils of the bottomlands. Their gray-brown bark is irregularly ridged or flattened and may appear to spiral around the trunk.



Overcup Oak

The deciduous leaves are 6-to-10-inches long and 1-to-4-inches wide with 5 to 9 lobes. The tip may be pointed or round, but the base is always wedge-shaped. One inch long petioles are slender and support the dark green leaves with pale-pubescent or nearly smooth undersides. Acorns, in pairs or singly, are closely attached to twigs.

Post Oak (*Quercus stellata*)

A classic post oak leaf resembles a cross. The two central lobes of the five on each leaf are larger and somewhat square.

Size varies from 3 to 4 inches in width and 4 to 5 inches in length. Leaves are dark green, covered with short, fine, soft hairs on top. Leaves are wooly underneath.



Post Oak

Acorns, singly or in pairs, are closely attached to stout, somewhat fuzzy, brown twigs. They are about 3/4-inch long with slight stripes running toward their somewhat fuzzy tips. The bowl-shaped cup covers about a third of the nut.

Post oak bark is thick and gray: blocky or scaly in youth, deeply fissured with plate-like scales at maturity. This species can be found as far north as Massachusetts and as far west as Iowa and Texas. A valuable timber species, post oak grows on dry, sandy soils or rocky slopes. Occasionally, it appears in rich bottomlands.

The sand post oak (*Quercus stellata* var. *margaretta*) also occurs in Florida. Generally smaller and scrubby, it has smaller leaves and more wooly twigs. The state champion sand post oak grows in

Gainesville.

Swamp Chestnut Oak (*Quercus michauxii*)

Also known as basket oak or cow oak, this 60-to-80-foot-tall swamp chestnut oak tree is found on moist, periodically flooded, bottomland soils from southern New Jersey to northern Florida. Its uses include traditional farming tools, baskets, posts, and barrels. Margins of the unlobed deciduous leaves have coarse, wavy teeth. The leaf is 5-to-8-inches long and 3-to-4-inches wide; dark lustrous green on top, silvery pubescent below.



Swamp Chestnut Oak

Solitary or paired lustrous brown acorns are 1-to-1-1/2-inches long with a bowl shaped cup of wedge-shaped scales covering a third of its length. Stout, red-brown twigs mature to a brownish gray, while bark of the mature tree is a furrowed, scaly gray outside and red inside.

White Oak (*Quercus alba*)

This model for the white oak group exhibits 7-to-9-rounded lobes with sinuses angled toward the usually three-lobed tip. Extending

from a 1-inch petiole, a yellow midrib runs the full 5-to-9-inch length of each bright green leaf. Two to 4 inches wide, the leaf's underside is pale. Acorns, solitary or in pairs, are almost directly attached to pale-to-gray twigs. The light brown 3/4-inch long nut shows three-fourths of its length beyond the bowl-shaped cap.



White Oak

White oak timber is valuable for ship building, furniture, barrels, baskets, and fuel. White oak acorns, a valuable wildlife food, were once widely used by Native Americans after the acorns were boiled to remove the tannin. This resource is available from southeastern Canada to mid-Florida and northwest to Minnesota.

Bark of the white oak is light gray: in scaly rectangles when young-becoming ridged and shallowly fissured at maturity. Trees may achieve heights of 80-to-150 feet with diameters up to 5 feet on rich soils, sandy soil, and stony ridges.

The Red Oak Group

Eleven members of the red oak group are native to Florida. As mentioned

earlier, all exhibit alternate leaves, pointed and/or bristle-tipped leaves and acorns which take two years to mature. The acorns of red oaks are generally bitter to the taste and frequently exhibit woolly or silky inner linings in a tough outer shell. These seeds generally germinate (sprout) in the spring.

Black Oak (*Quercus velutina*)

Black oaks reach heights between 70 and 85 feet with trunk diameters of 3 to 4 feet. The low, wide, spreading crown exhibited by open-grown trees is composed of branches and leaves dark green above and copper-green below. Leaves are generally wedge-shaped, with variable margins. The 5-to-7 broad or narrow lobes are sometimes separated by deep sinuses; sometimes by very shallow ones. Lobes and tip invariably display bristles. Petioles are long (3 to 5 inches) and stout. Tufts of hair are usually visible in the axils of veins on the underside of the leaf.



Black Oak

Acorns are variable as well-sometimes oval, sometimes nearly hemispherical. Bark

is reddish-brown on young twigs. The trunk bark is dark brown and smooth with an orange-red inner bark in youth. As trees mature, bark becomes thick and scaly with deep vertical furrows. Growing from southern Maine to Florida and Texas, black oaks may be found on dry slopes and ridges or moist, rich soils. It is rare in bottomlands. Leaves do not turn vivid colors in autumn, so this species is rarely planted as an ornamental. Its wood is valuable and the bark is a major source of tannic acid and a yellow dye called quercitron.

Blackjack Oak (Quercus marilandica)

The blackjack oak is a small tree, rarely exceeding 50 feet in height, occasionally used for posts, ties or fuelwood. Average heights are 20 to 30 feet with diameters approaching 12 inches. The crown of this species is frequently narrow and contorted and its bark is black, divided into block-like plates.



Blackjack Oak

Leaves of the blackjack are deciduous; dark yellow-green above and orange-pubescent below. Size varies from 2 to 3 inches

in width and 6 to 7 inches in length. The leaf shape is quite variable: they are broadly ovate with 3 (rarely 5) bristle-tipped lobes. The overall pattern of the leaf is a T, narrow at the base and broadest at, or very near, the tip. The base is roundly wedge-shaped.

The light-brown acorns are oblong to ovoid, about 3/4 inch long. About half the nut is covered by loose, reddish-brown scales of the cap.

Blackjack oaks may be found on dry, sandy soils from New York and southern Michigan, west to Texas and south to Florida.

Bluejack Oak (Quercus incana) [Formerly Quercus cinerea]

The bluejack oak is a small tree or large shrub seldom exceeding heights of 30 to 35 feet. Diameters of 5 to 10 inches are normal. Such diminutive size is not surprising considering the sites preferred are dry, sterile, sandy soils from Virginia to East Texas and south to peninsular Florida. It is a common associate of turkey oak and longleaf pine.



Bluejack Oak

The unlobed (rarely 1-to-4 lobes) oblong-ob lanceolate leaves are blue-green with woolly lower surfaces. They range from 2 1/2 to 5 inches in length and up to 2 inches in width. Leaves on sprouts may be irregularly dentate. The leaf tip may be rounded or blunt with a short bristle.

Acorns of the bluejack oak are nearly globular and are characterized by hairs near the apex and longitudinal striations. They are light brown with pale pubescent scales covering about half of the nut.

Laurel Oak (Quercus laurifolia)

The medium-sized laurel oak tree usually reaches heights of 50 to 60 feet, though trees as tall as 100 feet have been recorded. Diameters of 3 to 4 feet are normal.



Laurel Oak

Slender branches form a broad, round-topped,

dense crown. Laurel oaks are found scattered on sandy soils near streams and swamps from the coastal plain of North Carolina to central Florida.

Leaves are simple and deciduous, although they remain on the tree through much of the winter, generally falling in early spring. The tree will remain bare of leaves for several weeks before the new oblong leaves appear. They are 2 to 4 inches long at maturity, and 1/2 to 1 inch wide. Margins are either entire or irregularly lobed. Laurel oak leaves are lustrous green above and pale below with a yellow mid-rib.

Acorns are generally solitary, commonly sessile and egg-shaped. The 1/2-inch-long nut is brownish-black, covered by a thin, saucer-shaped cap with reddish-brown pubescent scales. Twigs are slender and deep red. Mature bark is up to 1/2 thick and dark reddish-brown: at first smooth, then becoming divided into deep fissures separated by broad, flat ridges.

Myrtle Oak (Quercus myrtifolia)

This small, evergreen oak is commonly found in coastal areas on sandy ridges from South Carolina to Mississippi--including peninsular Florida. Thick forests of wind-sculptured myrtle oaks are common

along seashores where development has not yet occurred. It is a small tree, seldom reaching over 35 feet in height with diameters generally from 4 to 8 inches. The bark is light gray and smooth, becoming shallowly furrowed and ridged and wrinkled at joints where the trunk bends.



Myrtle Oak

The 1-to-2-inch-long leaves are oval to oblong, leathery and sometimes bristle-tipped. Margins are entire and both surfaces are smooth, dark green and shiny. Twigs are hairy and acorns are very small, about 1/2 inch in diameter, and round. A saucer-like-to-top-shaped cup of small, flattened scales encloses about half of the nut. Acorns grow in pairs or clusters.

Although of no commercial value for wood products, the dense thickets provide protection for both wildlife and sand dunes, as well as enhancing the visual aspect of many coastal communities.

Shumard Oak (*Quercus shumardii*)

From Maryland on the East Coast to Iowa and

Texas in the West, the Shumard oak ranges as far south as central Florida. It is a large, attractive tree, attaining height of 90 to 125 feet on ideal sites in deep, rich bottomlands along streams and riverbanks.



Shumard Oak

Leaves of the Shumard are alternate, simple and deciduous in habit; obovate in shape. They are 6 to 8 inches long and 4 to 5 inches wide, with a wedge-shaped or flattened base. Six to 11 bristle-tipped lobes on each leaf are dark green above and paler green below with tufts of hairs where veins and mid-ribs meet. Sinuses are rounded and generally deep.

This commonly planted landscape tree has moderately stout, hairless, gray-brown twigs. Mature bark is thick with whitish, scaly ridges separated by dark fissures. The foliage of Shumard oaks turns a deep crimson red in autumn; one reason it is valued as an ornamental.

Its acorns are oblong to ovoid, up to 1-1/4 inch in length and 1 inch in

diameter. The cap is saucer-shaped with somewhat pubescent scales.

Southern Red Oak (*Quercus falcata*)

A valuable commercial species, the southern red oak may reach heights of 70 to 80 feet. Diameters of 2 to 3 feet are normal. Spreading branches create a broad, open, round-topped crown. Southern red oak can be found on dry, infertile soil in stands of mixed hardwoods and pine from New Jersey and southern Illinois in the North to Texas and central Florida in the South.



Southern Red Oak

Leaves are deciduous, 5 to 9 inches in length and 4 to 5 inches in width. The base is definitely bell-shaped at the junction of the flattened 1-to-2 inch petiole. Upper surface of the leaf is lustrous dark green and the underside is rusty and pubescent. Two basic leaf shapes are common: 1) obovate with three bristle-tipped apical lobes or 2) 5 to 7 deeply divided lobes with a long, often subdivided terminal lobe.

Acorns appear singly or in pairs. They are nearly round, 1/2-inch long,

and orange-brown. The cap may be shallow and bowl-like or top-shaped, covering a third to a half of the nut. Cup scales are pale pubescent except on the margins. The acorn is attached to stout twigs which are orange and pubescent in their first year, becoming hairless and dark red their second year. Bark of the mature tree is up to 1-inch thick, with dark brown or black rough scaly ridges separated by deep fissures.

Swamp Red Oak (*Quercus pagoda*)

This valuable timber and wildlife species, the swamp red oak sometimes referred to as cherrybark oak, was once known as *Quercus falcata* var. *pagodaefolia*. It is a common bottomland species of the southern coastal plain and the Mississippi River Valley. The largest specimens are found on moist, loamy ridges, old fields, and flats. Trees may reach heights of 100 to 130 feet and attain diameters of 3 to 5 feet.



Swamp Red Oak

Leaves are 5- to 11-lobed. They closely resemble southern red oak leaves, but have more lobes. Bark of mature trees is gray-black

flaky or scaly somewhat resembling the bark of a cherry tree. Acorns are about 1/2-inch long, round or hemispherical with a thin, shallow cap covering up to a third of the nut.

Turkey Oak (*Quercus laevis*)

The leaves of this relatively small tree are thick, rigid and heavily veined, bright yellow-green lustrous above and somewhat paler below. They are deeply divided into 3 or five lobes. Rarely there are seven lobes on a turkey oak leaf. Lobes may be toothed and the tip is usually 3-toothed. The underside of the leaf may show tufts of rusty-red auxiliary hairs. Petioles are generally twisted, allowing the leaf to sit perpendicular to the ground, reducing surface area exposed to the drying sunlight of its sandhill habitat.



Turkey Oak

Turkey oaks can be found in dry, sandy, sterile soil. Common uses include fuel and construction on farms. The form and size preclude use as commercial timber. Maximum heights are generally 20 to 30 feet, with diameters of 2 feet. The crown is broad, open, and irregular.

Acorns are light brown, about 1-inch long and 3/4- inch wide. They are oval with rounded ends. One end is enclosed by a small, thin red-brown cap covered by scales.

Water Oak (*Quercus nigra*)

The leaves of the water oak, a tall, slender oak are semi-persistent, falling a few at a time throughout the winter. This persistence may give the appearance of an evergreen habit, but leaves do not persist into the second growing season. Water oaks are extremely variable in shape and size, especially on sprout growth. Even on mature branches, shape varies widely. They are generally shaped like a spatula, narrow at the base and broadly rounded near the tip. Margins may be entire, three-lobed near the tip or variously lobed on both margins. Both surfaces of the leaf are green and smooth except for infrequent auxiliary hairs below. The lower surface is a slightly lighter green.



Water Oak

Even large water oaks (50 to 70 feet in height is

average) retain relatively smooth bark. It is smooth and brown in youth, grading to gray-brown with irregular furrows. Diameters of 2 to 3 feet are common for mature trees.

Acorns are solitary or occasionally in pairs. The light-brown-to-nearly-black nuts are oval to hemispherical in shape and may be pubescent near the tip. They are about 1/2-inch long with a pubescent, saucer-shaped reddish-brown cup.

This wide-spread species may be found in mixed pine-hardwood forests, along roadsides, in flatwoods, bottomlands or urban openings. Its range extends along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts to East Texas and south into central Florida.

Willow Oak (*Quercus phellos*)

This frequently planted ornamental tree reaches 80 to 130 feet in height with trunk diameters of 3-to-6 feet. Grown in the open, the trunk is short with a dense, broad oblong or oval crown covered with deciduous leaves with bristle-tips. In forests, the tree tends toward a longer trunk with a spherical crown. Preferred sites are rich, moist bottomlands along swamps and streams. This oak is rare on drier sites.

Leaves are 2 to 5 inches in length and 1/2 to 1 inch in

width and exhibit wavy or irregularly lobed margins on sprout growth. Like the willow this oak is named for, its leaves are generally lanceolate, though some specimens may be oblong. Most are broadest near the middle of the leaf. The upper surface is light green, smooth and shiny with raised veins. The lower surface is paler and may have whitish hairs along the midrib. The thin petioles are 1/4-inch long.



Willow Oak

Acorns may be solitary or in pairs, hemispherical and 1/3-to-1/2-inch long. The nut is yellowish brown and bluntly pointed. The cup is greenish-brown, thin and saucer-shaped, enclosing only the base of the nut.

Nancy P. Arny is former associate professor, School of Forest Resources and Conservation, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611

Program Announcements

Crash Course in Florida Gardening

Saturdays
February 9 and 16, 2013
9AM-12PM
Yulee County Building

Registration deadline is
Friday, February 1, 2013.
Cost is \$50 per person or
\$75 per couple.

Phone 904-879-1019 and
ask for Winifred Favors or
e-mail rljordi@ufl.edu to
enroll.

Checks should be made
out to Nassau County
Extension.

Landscape Matters

Citrus - Cold Hardy Citrus

Wednesday January 9, 2013 10AM - 11AM
Rebecca Jordi

Roses - Two days!

Tuesday February 12, 2013 10AM - 11AM
Selection, care, maintenance and feeding of shrub roses
and old garden roses

Wednesday February 13, 2013 10AM - 11AM
Pruning, preparation and growing of the traditional roses,
Tea Roses, Climbers, & Grandifloras
Master Gardener Paul Gosnell

Pruning Your Landscape

Thursday February 7th, 2013 10AM - 11AM
Rebecca Jordi and Master Gardener Bea Walker

Plant Clinics 10AM-2PM

Monday February 4 - Yulee Satellite Office
Saturday February 23 - Turner Ace Hardware Fernandina

Location

Yulee Satellite Office
(attached to Fire Station #30)
86026 Pages Dairy Rd. Yulee, FL

Location

Demonstration Garden
Nassau County Govt. Complex
96135 Nassau Place Yulee, FL

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Demonstration Garden
Nassau County Govt. Complex
96135 Nassau Place Yulee, FL

Bring us your tired, diseased, insect infested plants yearning to be free of problems. When possible place your plant in a plastic bag to prevent chances of spreading issues to other plants. You will receive current researched based information on proper plant care, disease management and insect control. These sessions are free to the public. No registration required. Come anytime between 10AM - 2PM for expert advice.

Spotlight on Nassau Gardens



October Winner - Smiley Lee

Smiley Lee is a gentleman who has lived in Nassau County all of his life and his parents settled here in 1924. His beautiful garden has an amazing view of the Nassau River.

Most of his garden structure is designed with salvaged material obtained from Smirfit-Stone and Rayonier LLC through the years. There are 60 enclosed planter areas built from used air duct material and pipe lines. Also good salvaged materials are the bricks for the walkway and wood for the small buildings and grape arbors.

Some of his favorite are the Duncan grapefruit tree, the Elephant Ear plant and the "Tara" grape vine which he obtained from his friend before it was patented. He also has many perennial flowers and bushes. There is always something lovely blooming and butterflies are everywhere.

November Winner - Ralph & Wilma Allen

Ralph and Wilma Allen have lived with a lovely lake view in Marsh Lakes for 7 years. Ralph has enjoyed building the walkways and patio and also the lovely garden waterfall made from natural rocks. Wilma has done a wonderful job planting her flower beds with Florida friendly native flowers and shrubs. They both enjoy the beautiful old oak and cedar trees that are always in view.



View more photos online at <http://nassau.ifas.ufl.edu/horticulture/spotlight/spotlight.html>. To be considered for Spotlight on Nassau Gardens, send a digital photo, with a description of your garden, along with your name, address and phone number to ncmg@nassaucountyfl.com For more information contact Rebecca Jordi at 491-7340 or 879-1019.

HARVEST GOLD

Fresh from the Garden

by Joseph Smith, Master Gardener

Hello everybody! Happy New Year! I trust everyone had a wonderful Christmas, filled with plenty of good food and good times spent with family and friends.

As we enter the New Year, I am sure most of us have purchased and replaced our calendars from the old year. On New Year's Day, my grandmother would go about the house, taking down the old year's calendars, and replacing them with the new. She would not allow a calendar from the old year to remain on her walls into the new year, nor would she allow a calendar from the new year to be hung before New Year's Day. According to her, hanging a new calendar before the new year began would bring bad luck. I don't know whether this is the case or not, but just to be safe, I always wait until January 1st to hang my calendars.

One type of calendar, or

actually a little booklet, that most farmers would not have done without in days gone by was a farmer's almanac. Almanacs have been printed and in use since ancient times. During the colonial era, next to the Bible, the almanac was the most important (and most used) book in most people's homes. Almanacs served as a guide to tilling, planting, harvesting, canning, baking, and many other tasks that were a part of everyday life in those days. Almanacs also contained recipes, weather forecasts, poems, proverbs, and astronomical and astrological information. Continuing this tradition, almanacs today still contain such information as planting dates, weather forecasts, tide tables, fishing calendars, and various astronomical data such as the times for the rising and setting of the sun, times for eclipses, dates for the phases of the moon, and positions of

the planets in the heavens. Many farmers still consult the almanac before planting and harvesting their crops.

One well known early colonial almanac was Poor Richard's Almanack, published by Benjamin Franklin from 1732 until 1758. Franklin sold as many as 10,000 copies of Poor Richard's Almanack a year, which was pretty good for colonial times. From Poor Richard's, we have gained such proverbial gems as "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," "A penny saved is a penny earned," "Half the truth is often a great lie," and "Love your neighbor; yet don't pull down your hedge."

My favorite almanacs are The Ladies Birthday Almanac (which has gotten rather hard to find lately), Grier's Almanac (which can be found for free at most feed and seed stores, and some pharmacies and

hardware stores), and the Old Farmer's Almanac (which can be purchased in most stores that sell magazines and books). Just last week, I stopped by Hilliard Pharmacy and picked up the new 2013 edition of Grier's. I find these almanacs to contain a wealth of interesting and useful information.

As far as the dates in an almanac go, they often revolve around religious feasts and festivals. Not only does the almanac list major religious feasts, such as the Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Easter, and Christmas, but also lists other lesser known dates relating to these religious celebrations. For instance, the Old Farmer's Almanac lists Distaff Day, the day after Epiphany (January 6th), as the day women would return to their spinning and other daily work after the long Christmas holiday, and Plough Monday, the first Monday after Epiphany, as the day men would return

to the fields to prepare the ground for the new year's crops. Ember days are also listed. Ember days are three days of prayer and fasting for good harvests and other intentions that occur four times a year on the Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays following the First Sunday of Lent, Pentecost Sunday, the Feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross (September 14th), and the Feast of St. Lucy (December 13th). Shrove Tuesday, better known as Mardi Gras, is another one. Shrove

Tuesday/Mardi Gras is the "Feast before the Fast", or the celebration before the rigors of Lent begin the next day on Ash Wednesday. This year, Mardi Gras falls on February 12th, and is a major celebration in New Orleans and other cities along the Gulf coast with early French colonial and Cajun heritage.

For a couple of weeks before Christmas, I was fortunate enough to visit a very good friend up in the Smoky Mountains of

North Carolina, Stephen Rhodes. Stephen is Cajun, and he and his family hail from Lockport, Louisiana. Stephen grew up in Micanopy, Florida, and graduated from P.K. Young High School in Gainesville. He went on to attend and graduate from Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, where he played on their football team. While in college, he went to work for the Chattooga Club, an exclusive private club and residential community in

Cashiers, North Carolina. Over the years, he moved up through the ranks at the club, first working in, and then managing, its Five Star Restaurant. He is currently club manager at the Chattooga, and resident sommelier at the club restaurant. I don't know if it is his Cajun blood, or the fact that he spent so many years managing a top-tier restaurant, but Stephen is the best cook I have ever met in my life (next to my mother, of course). Although Stephen can



Stephen serving wine at the Chattooga Club

take anything and turn it into a gourmet meal, Cajun cooking is his specialty.

Cajun cuisine is a style of cooking named after the French speaking Acadian, or Cajun, immigrants deported by the British from Acadia in Canada to what is now the State of Louisiana. In Cajun cooking, locally available ingredients predominate, and preparation is simple. Cajun cooking is spicy and flavorful, and the aromatic vegetables/spices bell pepper, onion, celery, parsley, bay leaf, green onions, fresh black pepper, tabasco pepper, and dried cayenne pepper are often used. Rice is also a staple of Cajun cuisine. Rice became the predominant starch in the Cajun diet because it was easy to grow in the hot, humid, wet environment of Southern Louisiana, and was also easy to store and prepare.

While visiting Stephen, I convinced him to share some of the secrets of Cajun cooking with me. He started out by saying, "The first rule of Cajun cooking is to always cook with wine—in your glass." I told him that should not be a problem.

Next, he said, "Learn to make a roux." He went on to explain that a good roux is the backbone of étouffée, gumbo, and other Cajun sauces, soups, and

stews. Stephen mentioned that although roux has simple ingredients, it is probably the most involved procedure in Cajun cooking, and can sometimes be tricky to make. Preparation involves heating fat in a pot or pan, and then slowly adding flour, stirring with a whisk while you do so. (In Cajun cuisine the fat used most often is bacon fat or some kind of vegetable oil, such as canola or olive, instead of the traditional French butter.) This mixture is then constantly stirred until the flour is incorporated, and then cooked (continue to stir) until at least the point where a raw flour taste is no longer apparent, the desired color has been reached, and the mixture has developed a nutty flavor. The final color can range from nearly white to almost black, depending on the length of time it is over the heat, and its intended use. The end result is a thickening and flavoring agent. Constant slow stirring is the key. Stephen also mentioned that it is not uncommon for beginners to burn the roux. If the roux burns, throw it away and start over, otherwise the meal would be unpalatable. (Directions for a basic roux will be given in the recipe for Crawfish Étouffée at the end of this column.)

And finally, Stephen said, "Familiarize yourself with

the Holy Trinity." When I asked him what he meant by that, he explained that the Holy Trinity of Cajun cooking consists of roughly equal amounts of bell pepper, onion, and celery, diced and mixed. This is the mirepoix, or flavor base, for much of Cajun cooking. Sometimes garlic, parsley, or shallots are added to, or substituted for, one of the three vegetables in the Cajun Trinity. The preparation of many Cajun dishes, such as étouffée, gumbo, and jambalaya, all start with this base. Bell pepper, onion, and celery became the base ingredients in the Cajun Trinity because they are flavorful, cheap, and readily available.

So there you have it, the very basics of Cajun cooking. Before I go, I would like to pass on to you a few Cajun family recipes that Stephen generously shared with me. The first is an étouffée recipe that was passed down to Stephen from his grandmother. (Étouffée is a typical and well known Cajun dish, and although the most popular is Crawfish Étouffée, it can be made using other types of shellfish.) The second is a recipe for Stuffed Mirliton that Stephen's family enjoys, and the third is his favorite homemade Cajun Seasoning recipe.

So that's it from me this time around. In closing, I

would like to wish you all a very happy, peaceful, and prosperous New Year. Until we meet again, God Bless, and Happy Harvesting!

Peace and Goodness,

Joseph

N.B.: I would like to note that the vegetables mentioned in the Holy Trinity of Cajun cooking, as well as most other vegetable ingredients of Cajun cuisine, can be grown in Nassau County. Onions and celery are now, or soon will be, in season here. Bell peppers can be grown, harvested in the Summer, and frozen for later use in cooking. And mirliton (see recipe page 12), an edible vegetable belonging to the *Cucurbitaceae* family (the same family as melons, cucumbers, and squash) and sold in grocery stores under the name chayote, also grows very well here. It must also be noted that mirliton is a good source of amino acids and Vitamin C.



Miss Breaux's Crawfish Étouffée

Ingredients

- 3 Pounds Crawfish Tails
- 1 Cup Each Bell Pepper, Celery, and Onion (Finely Diced)
- 1 Cup Green Onions (Finely Diced and Set Aside)
- 2 Teaspoons Cayenne Pepper (1 Teaspoon for a Milder Dish)
- 2 Teaspoons White Pepper
- 1 Teaspoon Black Pepper
- 1 Teaspoon Basil
- ½ Teaspoon Thyme
- 2 Teaspoons Salt
- 3 Cups Seafood or Chicken Stock (Preferably Seafood)
- ½ Pound Butter (2 Sticks)
- 7 Tablespoons Canola Oil (Or Vegetable Oil, but Canola is Better)
- 7 Tablespoons White All Purpose Flour



Directions

It is important to prepare everything before you begin to make this dish because you can not stop until you are finished. (It is also best if 2 people work on this recipe because of the constant stirring and attention it needs.) Mix all three peppers together, along with the basil, thyme, and salt. Set aside. Dice bell pepper, celery, and onion to be the same size, mix, and set aside. Dice green onions separately from other vegetables. Set aside.

To make roux, set aside 7 tablespoons of flour. Measure 7 tablespoons of canola oil and put in a sauté pan. Heat oil on medium high heat until oil starts to ripple and smoke. Once oil starts to smoke, take a whisk, and slowly, slowly, slowly whisk flour in, a little bit at a time, over a period of about 3-5 minutes. (It is important to note that from this point on, the roux needs to be constantly stirred to prevent burning.) Roux will begin to thicken. Continue to stir for about 15 minutes, or until roux turns a deep red brown, and smells nutty. Taste roux to make sure roux does not have a flour taste, and has a nutty flavor. (Again, it is important to constantly stir roux and not burn it. If it burns, start over.)

At this point, turn the heat down to medium. Slowly add diced vegetables (but not green onion) and one half of seasoning, and continue to stir (switch from the whisk to a wooden spoon) and cook for about 5 minutes until vegetables are translucent, but not mushy.

In a 2 quart saucepan, bring 2 of the 3 cups of stock to a boil. (Put stock on to cook at the beginning, warming it up, while preparing the roux.) Gradually, add stock to the roux, until all is dissolved. Reduce to low heat, and stir for 10 more minutes, until sauce begins to thicken. Take roux and vegetables off the heat, and set aside.

In a 4 quart saucepan or Dutch oven, melt one stick of butter. Sauté crawfish for 4 minutes. Add roux/vegetable mixture to the crawfish, along with remaining butter, and remaining cup of stock. Cook until butter melts, but do not stir, as stirring will separate the flour out. Instead of stirring, constantly rotate in a gentle circle. At this point, put serving plates in oven at 200 Degrees Fahrenheit. Add remaining seasoning mix and green onions, and rotate gently in a circle a second time until all is mixed together. Serve over rice in warm plates or bowls with warm French bread.

A variation of this recipe is a wonderful shrimp and grits. Do everything in the recipe the same, except substitute 2 pounds of shrimp and one pound of Andouille sausage (a coarse-grained Cajun smoked sausage made using pork, garlic, pepper, onions, wine, and seasonings) for the crawfish, and instead of rice, substitute soupy yellow grits.

Laissez le bon ton roule!

Notes

This recipe comes from the kitchen of Marion Breaux, my grandmother, in Lockport, Louisiana. I have very fond memories of growing up, visiting my grandmother, and smelling the delicious aroma of this dish coming from her kitchen.

Recipe courtesy of Stephen Rhodes.

Steve & Carol's Stuffed Mirliton

Ingredients

- 3 Mirlitons (Boiled, Cut in Half, and Seeded)
- 2 Tablespoons Olive Oil
- ½ Cup Chopped Onions
- ¼ Cup Chopped Bell Pepper
- ¼ Cup Chopped Celery
- 2 Teaspoons Minced Shallots
- 1 Teaspoon Minced Garlic
- ½ Pound Large Shrimp (Peeled, Deveined, and Each Cut into 3 Pieces)
- ½ Pound Crab Meat
- ½ Cup Dried Fine Bread Crumbs
- 2 Tablespoons Finely Chopped Parsley
- ¼ Cup Grated Parmigiano-Reggiano Cheese, plus 2 Tablespoons for Garnish
- Salt and Cayenne Pepper to Taste
- 2 Tablespoons Chopped Chives
- Cajun Seasoning (See Recipe Below)



Directions

Preheat oven to 350 Degrees Fahrenheit. Cut mirlitons in half, remove the seed, and using a spoon, scoop out the pulp, leaving a ¼ inch shell. Place pulp in a mixing bowl. In a sauté pan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Sauté the onions, peppers, celery, and shallots for about 5 minutes, or until they are wilted and golden. Season with salt and cayenne. Add the garlic, shrimp, crab, and pulp. (First pick through the crab meat to make sure it has no shells, or use Jumbo Lump Crab Meat, which is canned and pasteurized.) Sauté the mixture for 5 minutes. Stir in the bread crumbs, cheese, and parsley. Remove from heat. Fill each mirliton shell with the mixture. Bake for 1 hour. Place the stuffed mirlitons on a platter. Garnish with chives, cheese, and Cajun Seasoning. Serve.

Notes

This is a recipe made by my mother and father, Steve and Carol Rhodes, and is a family favorite.

Recipe courtesy of Stephen Rhodes.

Stephen's Cajun Seasoning

Ingredients

- 2 ½ Tablespoons Paprika
- 2 Tablespoons Salt
- 2 Tablespoons Garlic Powder
- 1 Tablespoon Black Pepper
- 1 Tablespoon Onion Powder
- 1 Tablespoon Cayenne Pepper
- 1 Tablespoon Dried Oregano
- 1 Tablespoon Dried Thyme



Directions

Combine all ingredients thoroughly. Use as a salt substitute on everything.

Recipe courtesy of Stephen Rhodes.



River Otters in Amelia Island Ponds

by Mary Chudzynski, Master Gardener

Right before Thanksgiving this year, three river otters appeared in the retention pond behind my house.

One of my neighbors, who had also watched them play, told me she thought it was a family, a mother otter and her two pups. They seemed to like “our” pond because they could be seen frolicking and eating every morning for at least a week.

Otters are actually members of the weasel family and are common on Amelia Island. They have short legs, long bodies, webbed feet and long muscular tails. These otters can weigh up to 17 pounds. Unlike other marine mammals, otters don't have blubber and rely on thick fur to keep warm. This double coat also keeps them afloat. They have great lung capacity and can stay under water for up to two minutes because of the valve-like skin in their ears and nose which keeps these orifices airtight.

An otter depends on very keen eyesight as well as hearing and smell to detect their food. Sensitive whiskers help find food on lake and river bottoms. While they love fish, otters will also enjoy crustaceans and birds. The river otter may even use its front paws to hold its prey. This explains why our pond lost at least three good-sized carp soon after the fish were placed in the water. Guess it wasn't a gator!

River otters live in dens called Holts that are dug into a riverbank or hollow log. Otters may have up to six pups or kits per season, usually born in the spring. And, the average lifespan is between 9 and 15 years.

When not eating, otters are curious and playful. They are known to chase sticks, play hide and seek and roll around in the grass. While playing, they make a variety of sounds: chirps, barks, whistles, grunts, squeals and growls. They are not bothered by water birds or ducks, often playing around them in the water.

If you ever get the chance to observe an otter at play, you'll instinctively laugh and marvel at their antics and agility.

Sources: Floridawaters.com, a site for St. John's River Management; eHow.com facts

“TO DO” LIST FOR JANUARY

Citrus: Water as needed - especially 24-48 hours before a freeze. Protect above and below grafted area on the trunk when freezing temperatures occur.

Fruits: Major removal of twigs and branches should occur before spring. Weed as needed. Keep grass away from root areas. Apply 6-6-6- or 8-8-8 fertilizer to Pears.

Flowers: Annuals to plant are carnations, pansies, petunias, snapdragons, delphiniums, larkspur, dianthus, and foxgloves. Be ready to move less hardy bulbs inside. Most others, like ginger and amaryllis, may show foliar damage during severe cold, but they can be left in the ground and they should survive. Tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils can be planted now if you refrigerated them for 8 weeks to meet their chilling requirements.



Roses: DO NOT Fertilize. Water as needed. Prepare sites for new plants 1/3 top soil, 1/3 dehydrated cow manure, 1/3 peat moss, ½ cup super phosphate or bone meal. Roses should be pruned once each year. In north Florida the best time is around Valentine’s Day, February 14th. A little sooner or later doesn’t really matter. If you want roses to bring to a show, you should begin pruning seven to eight weeks before the show. Some varieties take a little longer and some will bloom sooner, but eight weeks is a good rule of thumb.

Herbs: Plant anise, borage, chives, chervil, coriander, fennel, garlic, lavender, marjoram, mint, parsley, rosemary, sage, sesame, sweet marjoram, and thyme.

Lawns: This is fertilize free month. Check the soil to determine water needs. When the grass blades fold it’s time to water. Water once every 10-14 days in the winter unless we receive rainfall. If mowing, keep your mower height at the highest level.

Perennials: Water during morning hours only, when surface soil is dry to the touch. Make sure you have 2-3 inches of mulch around the roots. Outdoor plants require less water in the winter months.

Trees: Remove dead limbs, trim off suckers, lanky growth, and crisscrossing limbs; remove old seedpods. Don’t perform major pruning on any flowering trees producing blooms during the spring months.

Vegetables: English peas, beets, broccoli, potatoes, cabbage, celery, carrots, bunching onions, radishes, turnips, and cauliflower can be planted now.

Selected from Florida Vegetable Guide by JM Stephens, RA Dunn, G Kidder, D Short, & GW Simone, University of Florida and Month-by-Month Gardening in Florida by Tom MacCubbin

“TO DO” LIST FOR FEBRUARY

Citrus: Water as needed. Prune any water sprouts, suckers, rubbing or crossing branches. Weed as needed.

Fruits: Major removal of twigs and branches should occur before spring. Weed as needed. Check irrigation to ensure it is working. Make repairs.

Flowers: Remove all dead plant portions of annuals. Baby’s’ breath, calendulas, carnations, dianthus, dusty miller, Marguerite daisies, pansies, petunias, and snapdragons can be planted this month. Prune out declining foliage of bulbs as needed. Use insecticidal soap for aphids.

Herbs: Anise, basil, bay laurel, borage, caraway, cardamom, chervil, chives, coriander, dill, fennel, ginger, horehound, lemon balm, lavender, lovage, marjoram, Mexican tarragon, mint, nasturtium, parsley, oregano, rosemary, sage, savory, thyme and watercress can be planted now

Roses: Water as needed. Apply organic materials around each plant. 1 cup cow manure, 1 cup fish meal, ½ cup Epsom salts. Begin spray program every 7-10 Days with appropriate fungicide but remember to rotate types of fungicide; spray entire plant including underside of leaves.



Lawns: Cut St. Augustine lawns as needed; keep the mowing height highest level for your grass variety. Cutting grass too short encourages insect damage and disease. No fertilizer this month.

Perennials: Do not rush to prune out the dead or declining portions, as some cold may linger until March. Leaving dead portions on may provide some protection in case another freeze occurs.

Ornamental grasses: Remove all dead stems on deciduous grasses by cutting stems to 6-12 inches above ground. Remove only dead stems on evergreen ornamental grasses, leave green portions intact. Fertilize ornamental grasses at the end of this month!

Trees: Existing well-established trees and palms do not normally need special watering - the nearby irrigation of lawns, shrubs, and flower beds normally supply adequate moisture. Some exceptions may be dogwoods or red maples.

Vegetables: This month you can plant beets, broccoli, carrots, cabbage, collards, cauliflower, celery, endive/escarole, lettuce, mustard, bunching onions, parsley, turnips. Before you start your garden, be sure to have the soil tested. The University of Florida will do a full nutrient test for only \$7. Come by the office to pick up a soil kit or call us at 904 879-1019 for more information. Put raked leaves and grass clippings in a compost pile. As they rot, they make an excellent organic material to add to the soil when planting vegetables and some ornamental plants.

Selected from Florida Vegetable Guide by JM Stephens, RA Dunn, G Kidder, D Short, & GW Simone, University of Florida and Month-by-Month Gardening in Florida by Tom MacCubbin

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Sincerely,



Rebecca L. Jordi,
County Extension Director
Horticulture Agent III

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Barking Tree Frog

Ranging in size from 2 to 2 5/8 inches, the barking tree frog is one of the larger, most stout and more spotted of all the tree frogs. Its coloring varies from dark brown, bright green, or pale yellow or grey, although some green coloring is evident throughout all color phases.

Sandy areas in pine savannas and in low wet woods and swamps (e.g., willow oak-blackgum, cypress swamps) are its favorite places. When

inactive during a cold or dry season, it burrows under tree roots, vegetation, or in soil; otherwise it is mostly arboreal and thus dependent on trees near water.

The female lays a clutch of approximately 2000 eggs after heavy rains in spring or summer. In Georgia, even multiple clutches have been found. Eggs hatch in several days. Aquatic larvae change into terrestrial form in about 1-2 months. Insects and

small invertebrates are the bulk of their diet.

The barking treefrog is so named because of its

nine or ten syllable bark-like call. To hear the call of the barking tree frog

CLICK HERE.



Photo by Master Gardener Joseph Smith