**Primetime**

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**“Live Oaks – The Good and the Bad”**

Live oak trees are the favorite shade tree for our area. A native live oak tree can add thousands of dollars to the value of a property.

Live oaks are valuable because they are very attractive with their open structure and the horizontal orientation of the sturdy branches. Live oaks grow at a moderate rate to reach 40 to 50 feet tall in our soils and are at least that wide.

We call live oak an evergreen but the leaves are not evergreen at all but are dropped every year in March or April. The new leaves are in place within a week of the drop, so the bare branch state is a short one.

Live oak leaves make an excellent mulch. They are easy to move with a rake or shovel because of their small size and relatively thick blade. In the vegetable garden, you can walk on them between rows and they insulate well at depths as shallow as two inches.

Live oak leaves can be collected as mulch or placed as raw material in the compost pile. Mow them in place on the lawn to contribute to the organic material and nutrient levels of the lawn as they decompose.

Live oaks also drop acorns and their spent flowers. The spent flowers are very high in nitrogen so decompose quickly on the ground but they can be considered messy if you are a neatnik.

Acorns are a favorite wildlife food. Deer, squirrels, and birds rely on the acorn crop. Larger birds such as woodpeckers and blue jays consume the acorns whole. Smaller birds utilize acorns that are cracked on roads and sidewalks.

Individual live oaks produce numerous suckers from their roots. The suckers are especially prevalent on shallow or heavy compacted soils where the lack of soil or oxygen keeps roots close to the surface.

Suckering is a reproductive mechanism that produces acres and acres of oak mottes in poor soils. The mottes have many trunks that emerge from a single root system. Acorn seeded live oaks also become interconnected when their roots touch and fuse.

For the homeowner with a live oak prone to suckering the phenomenon means that you need to mow or prune down the suckers.

Live oaks are relatively pest tolerant and live for a long period – often over 200 years.

One disease that is a problem is oak wilt. This fungal disease invades and blocks the vascular system. The disease first invades an individual live oak through a fresh wound where the spore has been carried by a sap beetle. Once in the live oak tree the disease spreads from tree to tree through the interconnected roots at a rate of approximately 100 feet per year.

Oak wilt is very difficult to stop once it is in a stand of live oaks. Breaking the root connection by trenching is the normal method. Individual trees can be saved from a fatal infection by the injection of Alamo fungicide into the root flares. The treatment is nearly as difficult and expensive as trenching.

Luckily, prevention is easier. Protect live oaks (and red oaks as well) from infection by oak wilt by painting all oak wounds as they occur or are discovered. If you have oaks keep a spray can of pruning paint on hand.

Live oaks reproduce from the acorns as well as by sprouting from the roots but the usual way to add a live oak to your landscape is to plant a container grown specimen. Plants in 10 to 20 gallon containers are the most available size.

Dig the hole as deep as the container, and approximately twice as wide. Water it in well and mulch over the root ball. When the soil under the mulch dries, water again. You may end up watering once per week through the first summer.

There is no real advantage to add compost or root starter to the planting hole. Use the native soil. Fertilize with a cup of slow release lawn fertilizer per inch of diameter of the tree every fall or spring.

Compost may increase the growth rate of the tree if two inches is incorporated into an area of about 10 feet by 10 feet around the tree but it is not necessary.

If you have deer in your neighborhood, the newly planted live oak will have to be protected from their browsing and from antler rubbing. Protect the newly planted tree with a four-foot circle of strong wire that is six feet tall. Even sling wire must be braced with three fence posts to keep it from collapsing into the tree as the deer lean on it.