

## My Favorite Plant: *Quercus pontica*

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When asked what is your favorite plant, I have no difficulty saying immediately *Quercus pontica* K.Koch. This tree has given to my wife and me such nice memories that it should be regarded as my most beloved plant.

This has many reasons: the beautifully serrate, large leaf, like a broad leaf of *Castanea sativa*, that moreover beautifully colors yellow in autumn; the habit of growing from ground level as several stems; the huge, striped buds; the big acorns which already in August are mature and develop on seedlings of only ten years of age; and the spherical habit of the tree. In addition, the male catkins are fully 20 cm long. The clearly visible female flowers are typical for oaks, with their three facets, and may be admired on the small trees at eye level.

This species will not grow very tall. At maturity it will be about 8 m high on a favorable site, with a comparable crown spread. The seedlings I brought from Kara Dag in Turkey fruited after only 10 years of growth. How I met this most interesting oak, and what happened after my first acquaintance, is an interesting story.

In 1939 I finished secondary school in five years, at 17 years old, and my father was so happy that he awarded me 100 Dutch Guilders (quite a sum in those times). However, he made the provision that for that amount I had to buy trees for his garden, the Arboretum Trompenburg. From the four hectares there, 400 dying elms had been removed in the years 1920-1930. The average diameter of these trees was one meter!

My father was also on the board of management of the Rotterdam Zoo, which was moving from the town center to Blijdorp, and that area had to be planted with trees and shrubs. The curator was allowed to use his car plus driver, and I was allowed to join him in order to spend my *f* 100. We visited many nurseries in Holland and also abroad. Today, ten trees I bought with that *f* 100 are still growing in the Arboretum.

At the Hesse Nursery in Germany I first saw *Q. pontica* and immediately fell in love with it. I bought two of them, and these were planted to the right and left of a bridge to the present Goldfish Pond. One died, however, and the other could not be maintained there owing to its increasing size and to the loss of symmetry of the design. In January 1964 it was transplanted to the middle of a large lawn after having been prepared for this operation for three years. The first year involved digging around and cutting off half of the largest roots and backfilling the excavation again. The second year, the remaining half of the biggest roots received the same treatment, and the third year enough new roots were present so it was dug out during a period of frost. Every evening the rootball was watered to form a solidly frozen ball, easy to transport. Now it has developed nicely into a solitary tree with measurements of eight by eight meters.



*Quercus pontica* with its beautifully serrate, large leaf that colors yellow in fall  
photo©Guy Sternberg



Our head gardener supervises the transport of the Hesse *Quercus pontica* with its frozen root ball in 1964  
photo©J.R.P. van Hoey Smith

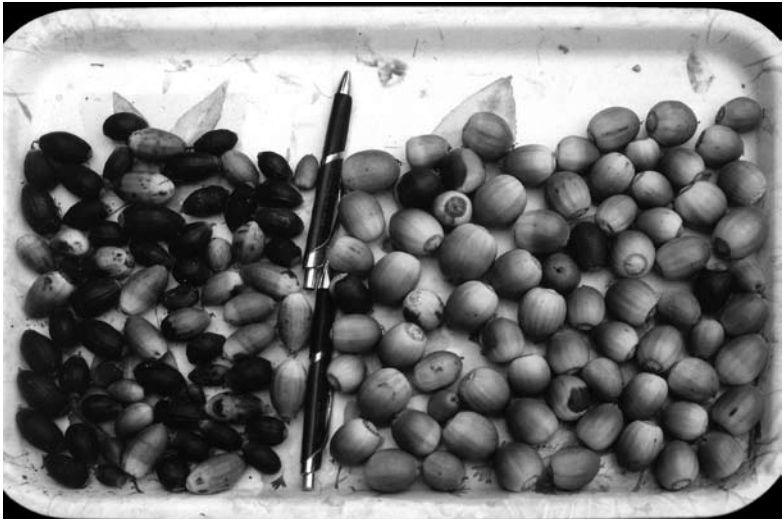
Considering all of its good features, I wanted to see this oak in its natural habitat. Hayrettin Karaca of Istanbul was vice president of the International Dendrology Society then, and I was president, and I contacted him asking whether he could organize a trip to North East Turkey in October 1988. We left Istanbul in two Land Rovers. En route we visited an isolated area where *Cedrus libani* was growing. In Turkey this tree only grows near the south coast, mainly in the Taurus Mountains. We spent the night in Artvin, where nobody could tell us the place to find *Q. pontica*. We then went to the Forestry Commission. They referred us to their branch office in Cargiranhaya. We arrived there, and the next morning they would bring us to our goal.



In the foreground are seen *Quercus pontica*; in the background are the spires of *Picea orientalis*, with Russia in the distance photo©J.R.P. van Hoey Smith

That morning, however, Karaca had other plans, and my wife and I got a special guide who would bring us to a place high in the mountains where *Q. pontica* should grow. We spent the night in a guest house of the Forestry Commission, and the following morning we were fetched by an official in a military uniform. In Turkey, all foresters are in the military service and even carry weapons. However, we did not go up the mountain, but down into the town. In front of his house we stopped; he whistled loudly and out of the house came his wife, and from the street his six children. He pointed to my camera and I had to take pictures first. After that we went up.

Over unimaginably bad roads with the deepest ruts we went. The bottom of the car regularly hit the soil. We continued up, fearing all the time that we would have to stop. We reached 1400 m. and luckily saw the first *Q. pontica*! Out of the car, we spotted an entire hillside covered with *Q. pontica* interspersed with compact, dark green, and pyramidal *Picea orientalis*. It was an incredible sight, with Russia in the background.



Seeds of the Hesse tree at left; the Kara Dag tree at right photo©van Hoey Smith

We were very lucky. It was just the right time for collecting acorns, and all, including the guide, collected as many as they could. It struck me immediately that these acorns were fully round whereas those from our arboretum from the Hesse Nursery are oval. The undergrowth consisted of *Sorbus aucuparia*, *Ilex colchica*, *Prunus laurocerasus*, *Sambucus racemosa*, and *Vaccinium arctostaphylos*. The last, between all the others, was over 2 m. high.

*Q. pontica* in the Kara Dag mountains are much in danger. By clear felling they are replaced by *Abies nordmanniana* and *Picea orientalis*. The small clubs of *Q. pontica* are transported down to a factory which produces chipboard.

The seedlings of the Kara Dag form have much bigger leaves than those of the Hesse tree, and the acorns are round. The 10-year-old seedlings fruit already, and I ascertained that even the seeds of the second generation show the same properties. I named this form *Q. pontica* 'Kara Dag', but is this correct? Should it not be a subspecies or a variety rather than a cultivar? Who can tell me? After all, at Kara Dag the plants have the same big leaves and the same round acorns as those in the second generation.

After this splendid and memorable visit, we went up to 1650 m. But there the acorns were only half sized and were not ripe enough to collect. However, we drove through a forest of *Fagus orientalis* and I collected some rooted seedlings. In the Arboretum Trompenburg these developed beautifully with very large leaves which bear dense hairs on both sides and also on the young shoots. The seedlings were just collected, not selected, but their buds and leaves are twice the size of those of *F. sylvatica*. At every tour through the garden I draw the attention of the group to this beech. In the nurseries I fear they only sell the hybrid of *F. sylvatica* × *F. orientalis* (*Fagus* × *moesiaca*) which has a somewhat bigger leaf than *F. sylvatica*.

Back in time, we waited for the other group. In a corner, four officials were playing bridge. We watched them and determined that they were playing very well. Our hunger in the meantime also increased. We pointed to our mouth and my wife made an egg with her hands. They understood, and soon 2 plates, each with two eggs, came from the kitchen. We waited outside on a bench in front of the hospital. A doctor came along who had studied in Holland and we had a nice conversation in Dutch. At last the other group came.

Every year I collect many acorns from my Hesse specimen and some less of the Kara Dag form. As usual with acorns, they must be sown immediately as they make the same year already a 10 cm taproot.

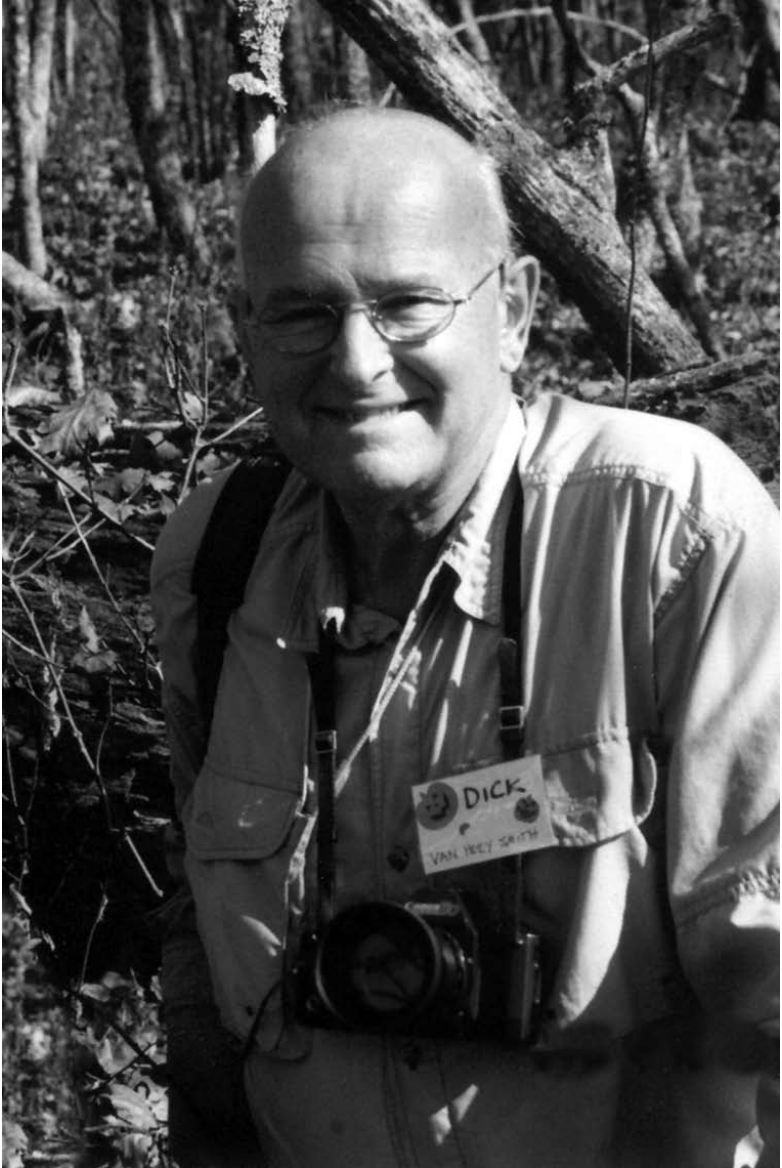
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Editor's note: This paper was adapted and translated from an article prepared for *ARBOR VITAE*, the quarterly of the Dutch Dendrology Society. We publish it posthumously in tribute to our respected author and founding member, who passed away on 21 December of 2010. Dick van Hoey Smith lives on for us via his world-renowned Arboretum Trompenburg, his life's work. But he can never be replaced for those of us who knew and loved him, and learned from him.



Our 70-year-old *Quercus pontica* grows solitary on the lawn

photo©J.R.P. van Hoey Smith



J. R. P. "Dick" van Hoey Smith

photo by Mike Tyner