

Oak Collections in Germany: Karlsaue and Wilhelmshöhe, Two Famous Parks in Kassel

by Eike Jablonski

In the heart of Germany, in the town Kassel, two excellent and spacious parks are situated. They house one of the finest dendrological collections in Germany. The parks are not very well known to dendrologists, even in Germany, but more than worth a visit.

Within the bustling modern city, on the edge of the river Fulda, Karlsaue provides a silent and restful place. The first gardens here were created around 1567, then already known for rare and exotic plants. The name Karlsaue derives from Landgrave Carl (1670-1730), who widely extended the park.



Quercus robur 'Pectinata', one of the old cultivars which may be seen at Karlsaue.

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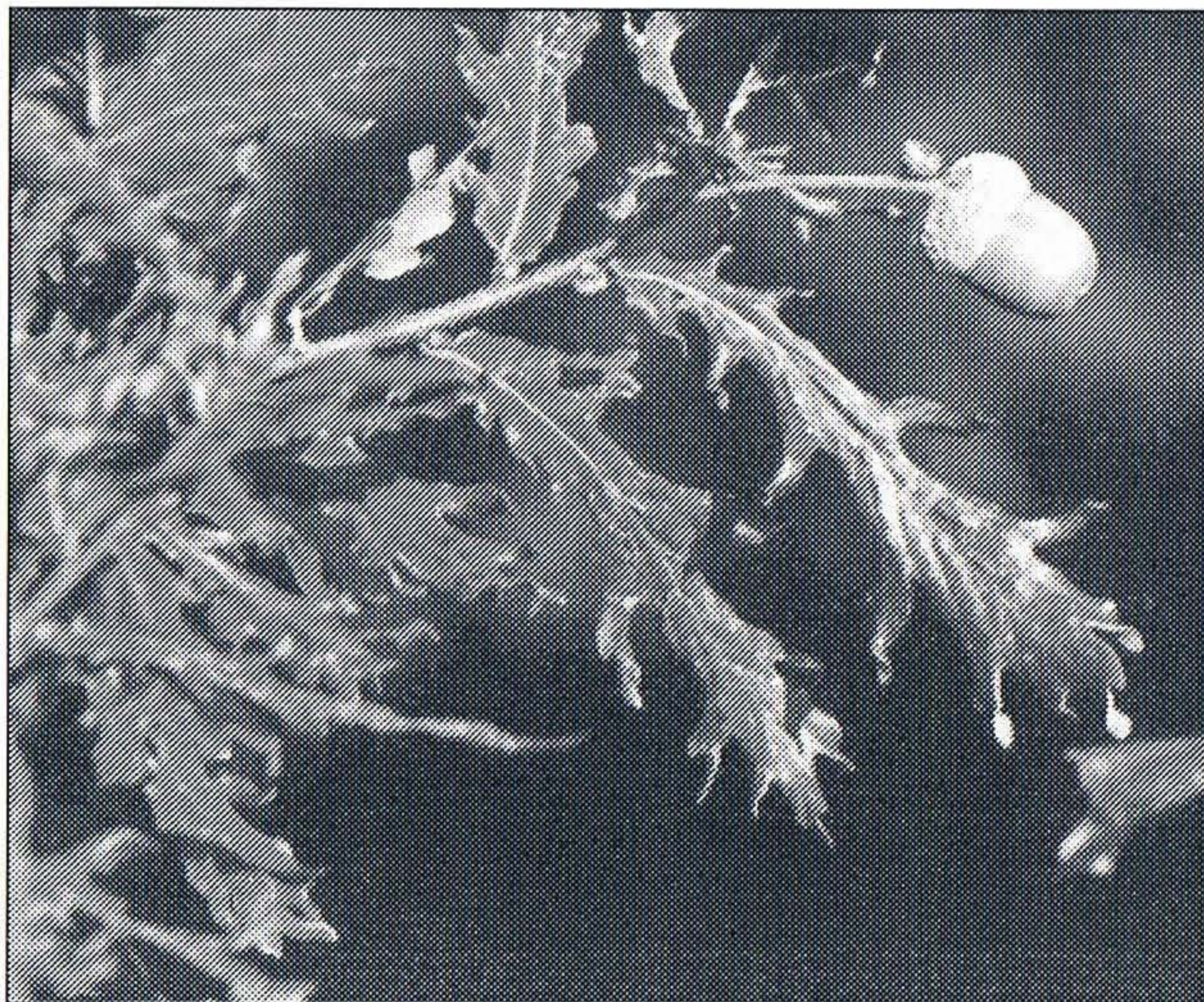
From 1570 to approximately 1800, the park changed again and again, to whatever was "en vogue" in landscaping in early times. But since 1800, an English Landscape Park finally was created and since then little has changed.

The Hessian electors promoted the introduction of unusual plants all the time and with the era of the English Land-

scape Garden, it became normal to start collections of rare trees and shrubs and of forms thereof. It is because of the knowledge of the head gardeners of these times that one is able to wander around a beautiful park with uncountable rare trees. Most specimens are one hundred years old or older.

From 1822-1864, Wilhelm Hentze was the Garden Director at Karlsaue. He introduced an oak cultivar, of which the type specimen is still to be seen here, *Quercus robur* 'Hentzei' (or in old reports *Quercus pedunculata heterophylla* 'Hentzei'). Hentze also introduced several *Quercus cerris* cultivars. One was named *Quercus cerris* 'Hentzei', with deeply dissected leaves, and is probably out of cultivation.

Amongst the different collections there is a special oak collection with old cul-



Quercus robur 'Strypemonde'

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tivars of *Quercus robur* (e.g. 'Aureobicolor', 'Argenteomarginata', 'Argentieovariegata', 'Cupressoides', 'Crispa', 'Hentzei', 'Fastigiata Kassel', 'Heterophylla', 'Pendula', 'Pectinata', 'Urpurascens', 'Pyramidalis', 'Salicifolia', 'Strypemonde'), and of *Quercus petraea* (e.g. 'Cochleata', 'Mespilifolia', 'Pungens', 'Purpurea', 'Muscaviensis') together with other cultivars and around 35 oak species. Collections of *Fraxinus*, *Acer* (including the very rare *Acer rubrum* 'Sanguineum'), *Aesculus*, and many more that make this worth the visit.

Outside Kassel on the slopes of the Habichtswald, the famous Park Wilhelmshöhe can be found. Wilhelmshöhe means "The Height of

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Wilhelm,” and the name derives from the elector Wilhelm I, who ruled over the electorate Hessen-Kassel from 1785-1821. Wilhelm I was, like most of his predecessors, a keen patron of arts and science and he supported his gardeners as well. (In spite of this, he was corrupt and unpopular among the people. He became rich by selling and sending Hessian soldiers to the War of 1812 in America.) In an account from 1785, already 431 different species of trees were listed, these plants mostly introduced from North America. To every officer in the Hessian army in America, the order was given to bring back home rare trees from the battlefields. Many of these trees can still be seen at Wilhelmshöhe, but as with the trees in Karlsaue, these American trees are by now past their zenith.

From 1800 onwards, the Dendrological Experimental Garden (Dendrologischer Versuchsgarten)

cultivated the trees for the park, and new forms and cultivars of trees were raised here. Some of them are still found in dendrological collections in Europe.

The above-mentioned Wilhelm Hentze was also in charge of Wilhelmshöhe and planted beautiful oaks. *Quercus robur* ‘Hentzei’ still grows here but is surrounded by shrubs and other trees and is not in good condition. The most interesting oak is *Quercus robur* ‘Fastigiata’. Of course, ‘Fastigiata’ is nothing special today, but this tree is the first living specimen that came directly from the “mother of all fastigate oaks” in Europe, also called the “Beauty Oak of Harreshausen.” This impressive speci-



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Quercus robur ‘Fastigiata’. Three variations in growth habit, all descended from the Beauty Oak of Harreshausen, seen here at Niagara Parks Botanic Garden, Ontario, Canada.

men of *Quercus robur* showed in the upper part strong columnar branches, and the specimen in Wilhelmshöhe is a direct graft of the original. The first grafted 'Fastigiata' was planted in 1795. All other fastigiate *Quercus robur* derive from this oak and at Wilhelmshöhe Nursery. The best seedlings (better shape and more upright) were selected and cultivated. One of these selections is *Quercus robur* 'Fastigiata Kassel', also growing here. The oak collection is one of the main features at Wilhelmshöhe.

For several decades there was no great interest in tree cultivars in Germany, but today the old oak cultivars are becoming more and more popular. One of the merits of the nearby Döring nursery was to propagate all the oaks from Kassel even in times when there was little commercial interest for them. Dieter Döring found lost cultivars in the park and also selected new ones. One of his introductions is *Quercus coccinea* 'Karlsaue' and another one is a slow growing *Quercus palustris*. He also found a deeply lobed *Quercus frainetto* and other interesting forms amongst his seedlings.

Last but not least, there was another event in Kassel that featured oaks at the

famous art museum, the Documental. In 1981 Joseph Beuys, an artist known for using very eccentric objects like clods of rancid butter in a bathtub, began to create his "7000 Oaks" project. Within the following 5 years, 7,000 oaks were planted in the city, always together with a pillar. This object symbolizes the contrast of art and nature, life and death, of one and all, and more - whatever one translates it to be. Anyway, this project brought many English oaks to Kassel, which alone justifies this action. However, it seems that the city faced some problems in planting the trees and installing the pillars because some of the 7,000 oaks turned out to be maples and plane trees ...

The 1998 Oak Open Days will be held in Kassel, September 26 - 27. Plans are to visit all of the above locations. In addition, a trip extension will lead to Berlin and to Muskau, an ancient oak collection which straddles the current international boundary with Poland. The excursion to the Polish side will take place with special permission of the Polish authorities, and will provide a rare opportunity to observe the many interesting oaks growing there.

Editor's note: Eike Jablonksi, an International Oak Society member from Germany now residing in Luxemborg, is the organizer for the 1998 Oak Open Days.