excerpts from **MEXICAN MAGIC**
by John G. Fairey and Carl M. Schoenfeld

<u>*Quercus* (evergreen oak, zone 7)</u>

As a result of Lynn Lowrey's foresight and tireless efforts for over 25 years, numerous everygreen oaks from northeastern Mexico are now well-established in the Texas landscape. Most noteworthy are *Q. risophylla, Q. canbyi* and *Q. polymorpha.*

The ability of these trees to adapt to adverse growing conditions is amazing. *Q. risophylla* performs best in neutral or slightly acidic soil, but *Q. canbyi* and *Q. polymorpha* will adapt to almost any soil. All of them, once established, are extremely drought-tolerant. Any tree that can survive and grow in the generally poor soil and scorching heat of our Texas cities has to be tough.

Many of these fine oaks have been established for over 20 years and are growing into magnificent specimens. Each has a distinctly different form, leaf color and texture, thus introducing a whole new aesthetic dimension to the landscape -- a welcome relief from the countless numbers of *Q. virginiana* that have been overused in Southern landscapes for years.

In central Texas, oak decline has been increasing and is destroying entire colonies of large *Q. fusiformis* trees, the dominant evergreen oak species in the Hill Country. Fortunately, *Q. polyphorma* and *Q. canbyi* are proving much more resistant to this fungus and can be used to help replace the much-needed source of shade that is being lost.

Reportedly, over 400 species of oak exist in Mexico. Therefore, untold numbers of species have yet to be tested in the U.S. and we are always on the lookout for those with landscape potential. During the past five years, we have collected acorns from many colonies of oaks with widely varying characteristics.

The following selections from Mexico each have unique qualitites to distinguish them from others. All are handsome, sturdy trees that add much-needed diversity of color, texture and form to our landscapes. However, many of these oaks have not yet been identified, so their species remains a mystery.

<u>Quercus (La Encantada oak, zones 7 to 9)</u>

In 1991, J.C. Raulston joined us on an expedition that included exploring a high mountain range in the southest corner of Nuevo Leon. Near the small village of La Encantada, at 7,000 feet altitude, we encountered a large colony of very stately evergreen oaks. J.C. thought these to be the finest oaks he had ever seen in northeastern Mexico, and he collected some cuttings.

At maturity, this oak will reach a height of 100 feet; its form is dense and cylindrical. The gray, slightly furrowed trunks are a stunning support for the compact limb structure. Leaves

are 1 1/2inches long by 1/2 inch wide, glossy dark green and sharply pointed at the tips. In early spring, the tree sheds its leaves and the new foliage emerges a showy bronze and remains this color for several weeks.

To propagate this oak, lay the acorns horizontally on top of the soil. If kept moist, they germinate quickly. As a result of our extreme summer heat in Texas, young trees are difficult to grow in containers. But once planted in the ground, they catch on and grow 2 to 3 feet each year.

<u>*Quercus* (Spinoza oak, zones 7 to 9)</u>

In 1989, we noticed this unusual evergreen oak growing in a deep canyon, approximately 30 miles south of Monterrey in Nuevo Leon at 5,200 feet altitude. Thus far, we have located only one specimen of this plant. It is well over 80 feet tall, and its form, leaf color and texture make it stand out as very special.

The other oaks in the immediate vicinity are *Q. risophylla* and *Q. sartorii;* several botanists have suggested that Spinoza oak is possibly a natural hybrid of these two species. Whatever its origin, it is an exceptionally fine tree that merits attention.

The leaves of Spinoza oak are 6 to 8 inches long by 3 inches wide, glossy, bright olive green and of medium texture. The size, color and texture of the leaves are similar to those of *Q. risophylla,* but the border of the leaf is different. The leaves of *Q. risophylla* have an almost smooth edge with only an occasional 1/4-inch-long arista at the end of each leaf. Spinoza oak's leaves, on the other hand, have undulating edges lobed with 1/2-inch-long aristas, similar to the leaf edge of *Q. sartorii.*

Another striking feature of Spinoza oak is its bright red-purple flush of foliage in spring, which continues off and on during the growing season. This tree is easily propagated from acorns collected in fall and planted immediately. Plants will come true to type from acorns. From our 1989 collection trip, we have trees that have reached 10 feet in height.

<u>*Quercus* (Zaragoza oak, zones 7 to 9)</u>

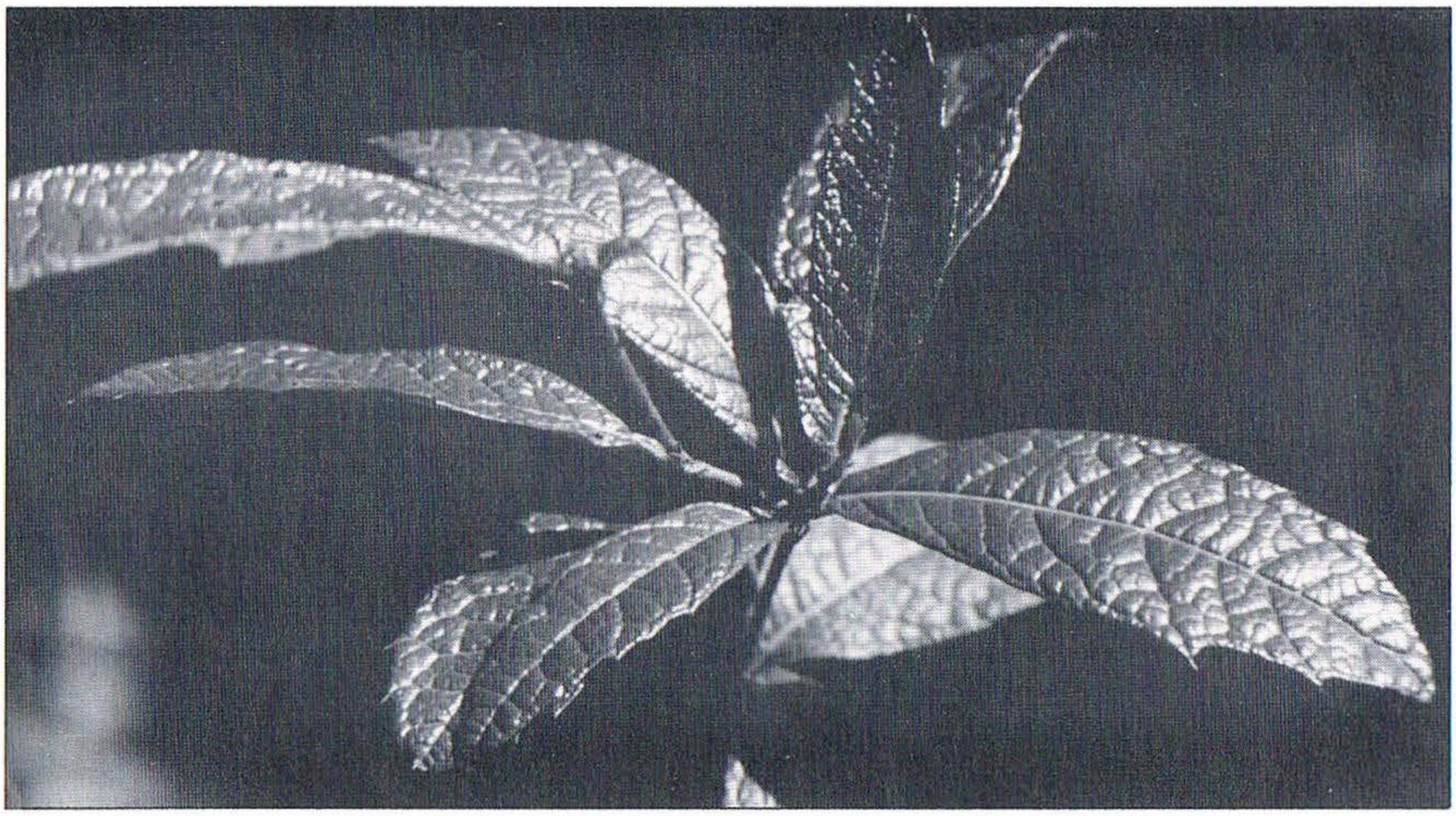
In 1992, we showed this tree to Brett Hall, Manager of the Arboretum of the University of California, Santa Cruz. Brett was amazed at this oak's simialrity to *Q. tomentella*, which is found on an island off the coast of California.

This high-altitude oak exhibits an unforgettable display of color when it flushes spring growth. The slightly scalloped leaves emerge woolly and maroon, slowly turn brilliant red, and eventually change to olive green with pink edges. The upper leaf surface is beautifully accented by the silvery tan of the heavy tomentum on the underside. The soft, colorful foliage is inviting to the touch.

The mature leaves are dark green, of heavy substance and 6 to 8 inches long by 3 inches wide. The tomentum on the underside of the leaf evolves to a rich yellow-ocher. The gray-white mottled bark of the saplings is also striking, as is this plant's form. As an understory tree, Zaragoza oak develops an open habit. In open spaces, it reaches 40 to 50 feet in height and develops into an impressive tree with a distinctly cylindrical form and dense foliage.

The acorns of Zaragoza oak are easily germinated but difficult to grow in containers. Once planted in the ground, the trees do well but grow only a few inches each year.

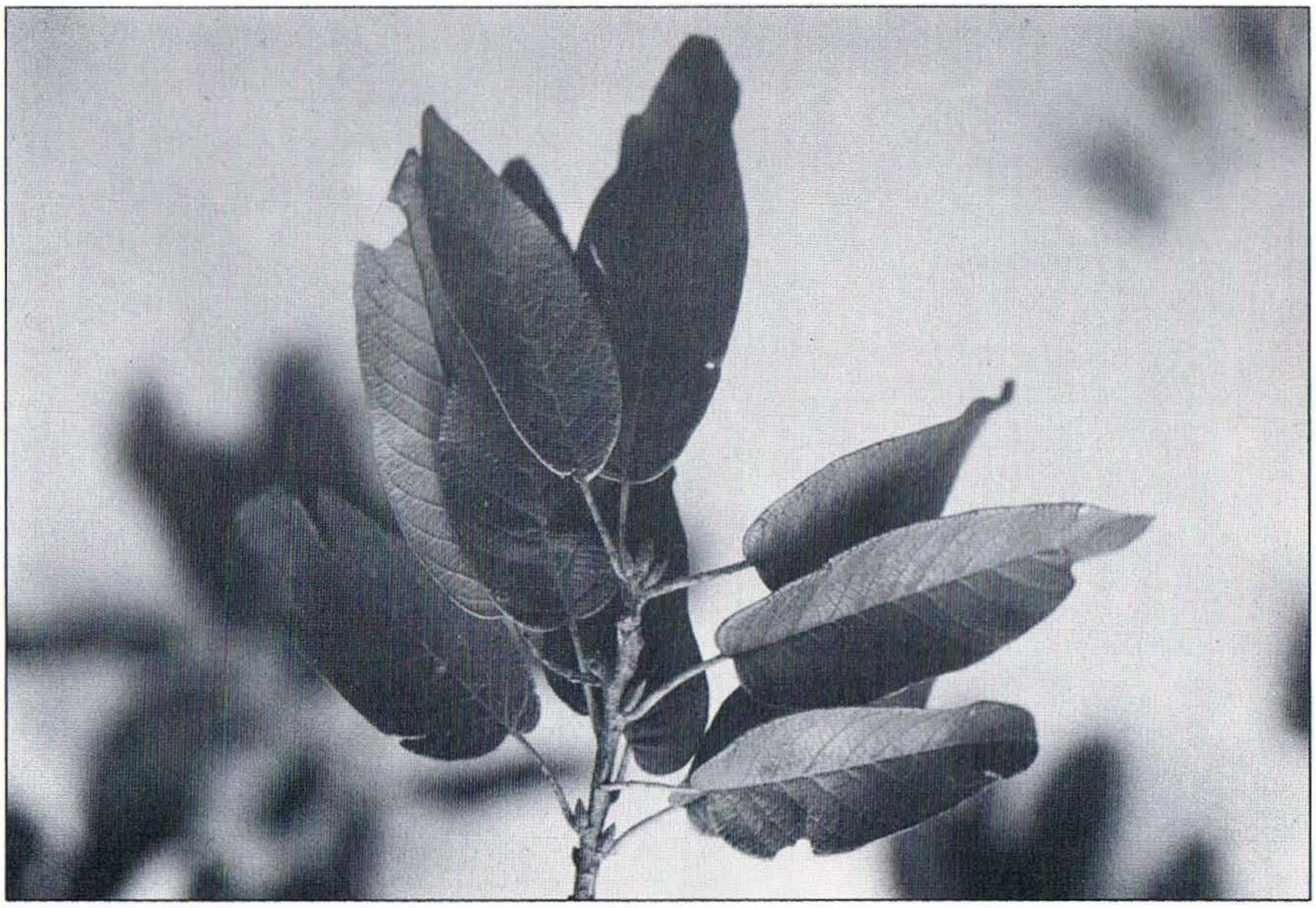
This article was reproduced from the December 15, 1993 issue of American Nurseryman *magazine with the kind permission of the editor of* American Nurseryman *magazine and John G. Fairey.*



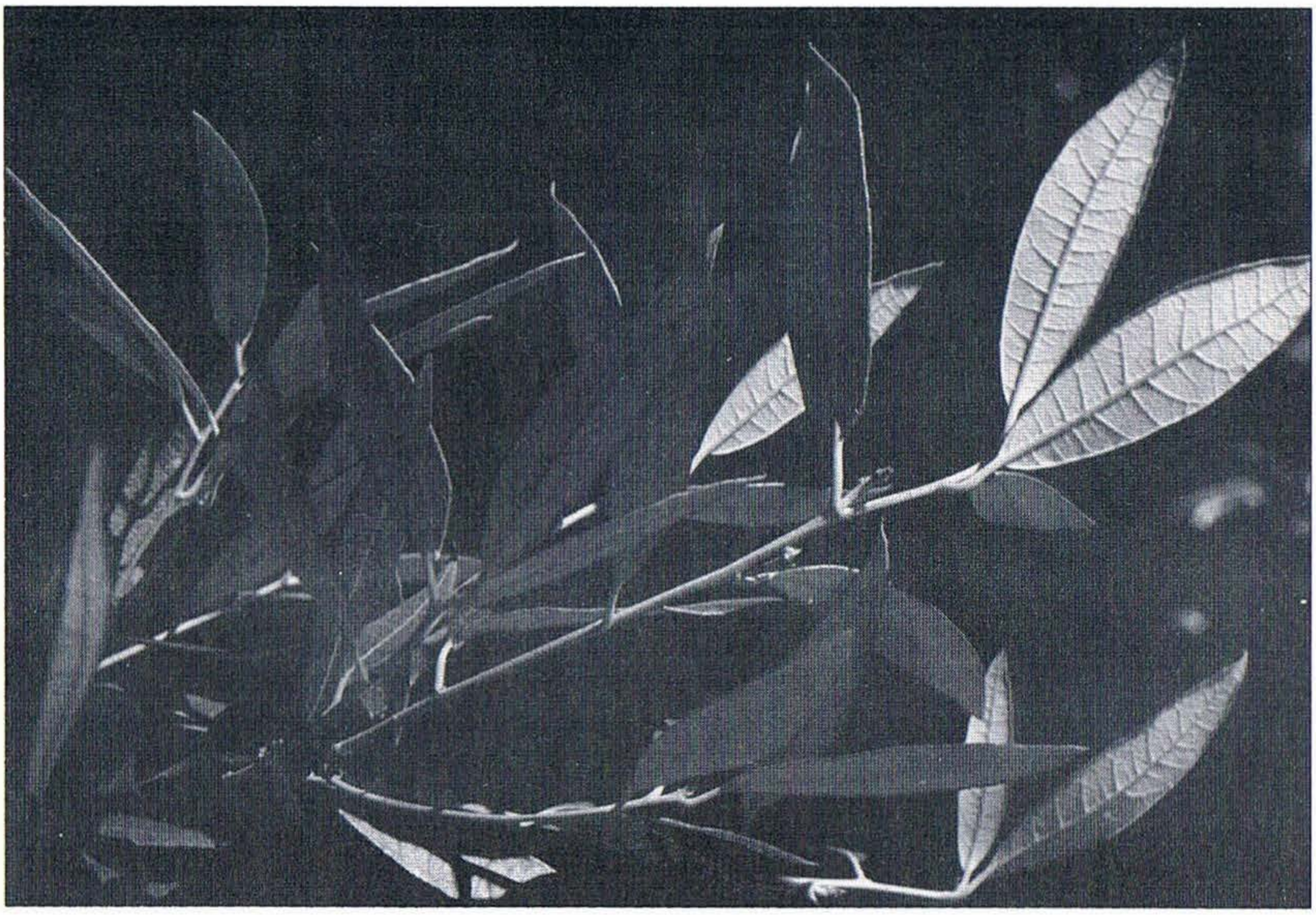
Quercus risophylla (seedling) Chipinque Park, Monterrey, Mexico
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg

Quercus satorii Past Cola de Cabello, N.L. Mexico. Elevation 5000'
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg

Quercus polmorpha Chipinque Park, Monterrey, Mexico. Elevation 3000'
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg



Quercus polymorpha Bufa el Diente, Sierra San Carlos, Tamps., Mexico
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg

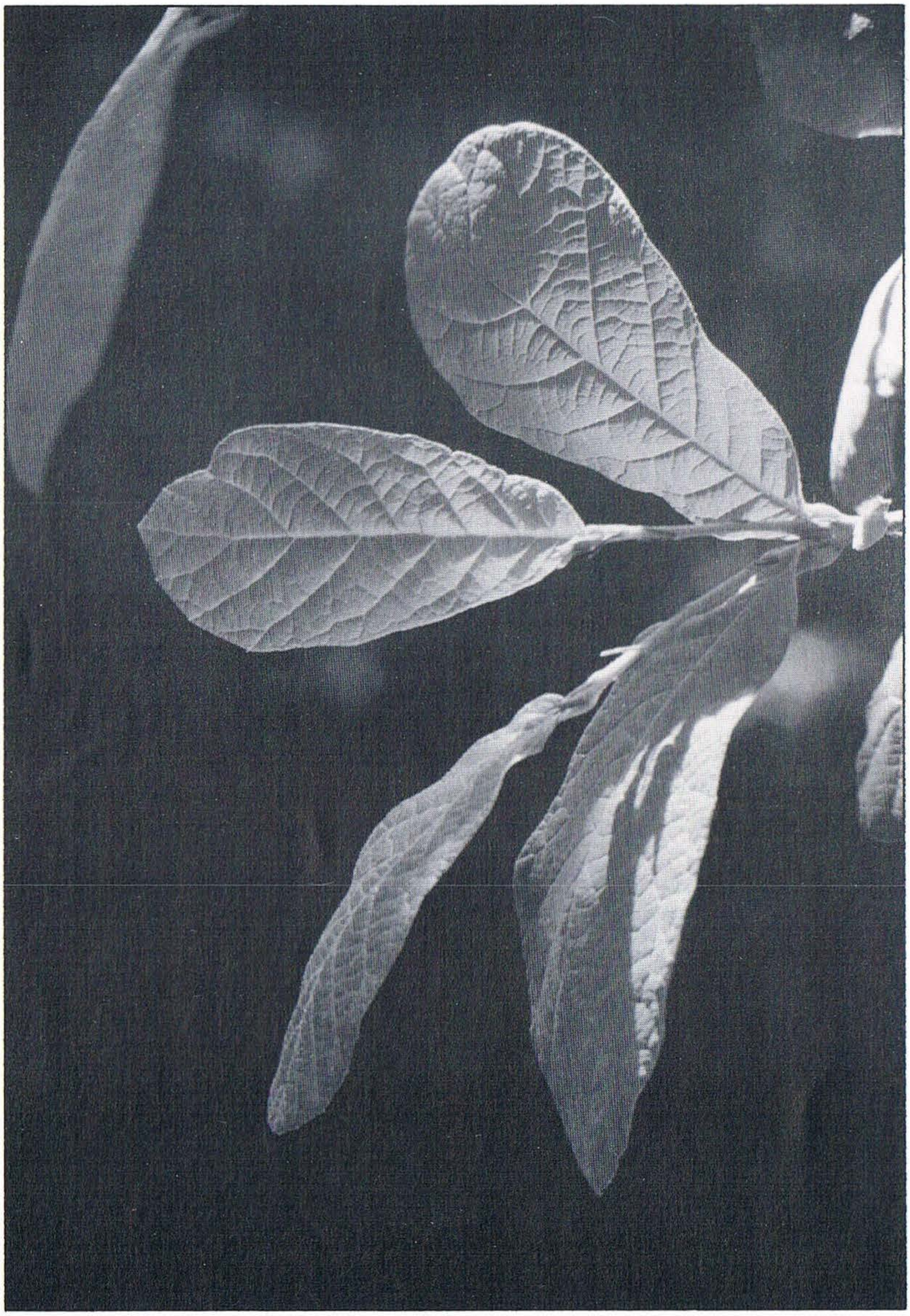


Quercus hypoleucoides
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg

Quercus greggii
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg

Quercus laeta Laguna de Sanchez, N.L. Mexico. Elevation 6200'
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg

Quercus canbyi Chipinque Park, Monterey, Mexico. Elevation 3000'
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg



Quercus obtusata Starhill Forest Arboretum
Photograph © Guy & Edith Sternberg