

LIVE OAK SOCIETY

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In Louisiana, home of the Live Oak Society, the live oak tree, *Quercus virginiana*, may be found in the center of a cleared savanna, in city park groves, in allées fronting plantation houses, and on ridges of high ground along the coast. They provide shade, food for animals and mankind, protection from storms, and peaceful solitude for the soul just by being there. Called the live oak because it is never completely bare and stays green all of its life, it is admired and respected by thousands of people.

"The live oak is the noblest of all our trees, the most to be admired for its beauty, the most to be respected for its majesty and dignity and grandeur, most to be praised for its strength, most to be cherished and venerated for its age and character, and most to be loved with gratitude for its beneficence of shade for all generations of man dwelling within its vicinity." Such eloquence was written in 1934 by Dr. Edwin L. Stephens, the first president of the University of Southwestern Louisiana, when he founded the Live Oak Society. Stephens proposed a charter list of 42 members composed entirely of live oaks, each of them 100 years old or older. Only one honorary human member was allowed, an honorary chairman to register the trees.

Stephens gave instructions on measurements for membership. "Take the girth of the tree with a tape line, at a height of four feet from the ground. Also measure the diameter of the spread, from tip to tip of the longest limbs, and estimate the height. Trees younger than a hundred years old (the requirement is that a tree be at least 16 feet in circumference to be declared 100 years old) may be noted and listed for the Junior League." Eight feet to 16 feet is considered Junior League membership. The first branch of the Junior League was 100 trees on the USL campus "including 18 that are exactly the age of the Twentieth Century, having been set out on Jan 1, 1901." In January, 2001, those 18 trees were honored in a special ceremony by the Live Oak Society and the city of Lafayette, Louisiana.

Unfortunately, Stephens died in 1938 and the Society floundered until 1957 when his daughter approached the Louisiana Garden Club Federation who agreed to assume the responsibilities and goals of the Society. The rules are few and simple. Members shall not be white washed. No member shall be desecrated with advertisements—that means no signs. And, most important, 'thou shalt not kill' — no "quercocide".

To insure each member its own identity, it is given a name by its owner or sponsor upon registration in the Society. It is also given a registration number. Some trees are named after the town in which they live, like the "Destrehan Oak" in Destrehan, Louisiana. Some are named after the owner or sponsor as "The Lee Bing Oak" in Lacombe, Louisiana. In New Orleans' City Park there are dramatically named oaks— "Dueling Oak" and "Suicide Oak". Many are memorials to family members. Only this past summer a teenage girl was killed



Fig. 1. Dr. Edwin Lewis Stephens, Founder of the Live Oak Society.

Photo courtesy of the author.



Fig. 2. The author of the article and the Chairman (and only human member) of the Live Oak Society.

Photo courtesy of the author.

But nature would not let some oaks live a life of leisure. Following the devastation of Hurricane Hugo in 1989, beloved oaks on Johns Island, South Carolina, were left mangled and useless. The good citizens offered their trees for the restoration of historic ships and more than 100 tons of live oak wood provided new life to old ships.

Today, the preamble of the Live Oak Society of the Louisiana Garden Club Federation, Inc.'s Constitution reads: "Whereas the Live Oak is one of God's Creatures that has been keeping quiet for a long time, just standing there contemplating the situation without having very much to say, but only increasing in size, beauty, strength and firmness day by day, without getting the attention and appreciation that it merits from its anthropomorphic fellow-mortals; and Whereas it has been found that organization and publication are a good means of promoting influence and service in the world; Therefore this Constitution for an universal association of Live Oaks is hereby ordained and established."

Adhering to this Constitution, the live oaks responded in great voice and today the Society boasts of 4,075 members in thirteen states. Chairman (and the only human permitted in the Society) is Coleen Perilloux Landry whose interests began as a child when her father attached her swing to a live oak tree. Her mother, who also had a great love for live oaks, forbade anyone to cut even one branch of her trees. Thus, a love affair with oaks began on the Great River Road in Montz, Louisiana.

Landry has traveled hundreds of miles measuring live oaks for registration. She has measured oaks at St. Joseph's Abbey in Covington, Louisiana, naming them for previous Benedictine Abbots. An oak in a cemetery in Reserve, Louisiana, has been named "The Msgr. Jean Eyraud Oak". Eyraud is a candidate for sainthood in the Catholic Church. In commemoration of the 275th anniversary of the Ursuline nuns in Louisiana, Landry measured and registered some 20 live oaks on the convent and academy grounds. She has tramped the banks of Bayou Teche and Bayou Lafourche in Louisiana and wherever a potential member resides. Landry recently contacted the owner of Boone Hall Plantation outside of Charleston, S.C. about registering more than 200 live oaks planted in 1748 by Captain John Hall.

when the car in which she was riding slammed into an oak tree. Her parents registered the tree and named it in her memory and honor.

In the span of centuries the live oak has had a long record of service in the United States. Its great limbs supported lynch ropes for horse thieves; duels for honor were fought at dawn under oaks; the shade of a majestic oak provided a setting for signing treaties between the French and the Indians; songs were composed and marriages proposed.

Officially, the United States Navy used its wood for ship-building for almost two centuries. Because its wood is so hard and is able to withstand drying and wetting, the government bought tracts of land in southern states, protecting live oaks that were there and planting more. After the Civil War when the United States began to turn towards ships made of iron, the live oaks began to enjoy a more relaxed life. They began to be mostly things of beauty and poetry, as in Walt Whitman's poem "I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing."



Fig. 3. The Seven Sisters Oak, shown here with owners Mr. and Mrs. Milton Seiler, is located in the Lewisburg area of Mendeville, Louisiana and is the current President of the Live Oak Society.

Photo courtesy of the author.

pollution, mainly chemical, was thought to be the killer of the "Locke Breaux Oak" in Taft, Louisiana. Located across the Mississippi River from the Bonnet Carre Spillway, the massive oak reigned from 1934 to 1968 when it was considered legally dead by County Agent Achille Melancon. The river corridor in that area is lined with chemical plants, petroleum plants, and a nuclear power plant.

The next greatest threat to the live oak is urban sprawl, which

The largest stand of registered live oaks is in City Park in New Orleans. The largest oak, and president of the Live Oak Society, lives on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain in Lewisburg near Mandeville, Louisiana. The "Seven Sisters Oak" has a girth of 38 feet and is considered by foresters to be 1200 years old. The First Vice-President is the "Middleton Oak" in Charleston, South Carolina with a girth of 31 feet. Second Vice-President, "St. John Cathedral Oak" in Lafayette, Louisiana, enjoys a girth of 26 feet 7 inches; followed by the third Vice-President, "The Lagarde Oak" in Luling, Louisiana, with a span of 28 feet. "Martha Washington Live Oak", with a girth of 27 feet 6 inches, resides in Audubon Park in New Orleans, Louisiana and reigns as Fourth Vice-President.

Survival, the greatest challenge of the live oak, is foremost on the agenda of the Live Oak Society in 2002. Air and ground water



Fig. 4. Historic photo of the Locke Breaux Oak, the original president of the Live Oak Society, now deceased.

Photo courtesy of the author.

piles tons of concrete and soil on top of the tree's roots, literally smothering the tree to death. With urban sprawl comes new roads and highways, plowing down everything in their path. The Live Oak Society has been instrumental in lobbying states and counties to build around live oaks rather than destroying them.

Through public relations campaigns and education of the public the Society hopes to save live oaks in every possible situation. In the coastal regions of the United States it has been proven that live oaks help protect against the forces of a hurricane, and residents in those regions are being encouraged to plant live oaks. It is believed that the tree's horizontal growing habits make them more able to withstand high winds. The environment also benefits from a single live oak, as it absorbs about 30 pounds of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere in one year, while releasing 15 pounds of oxygen into the air.

If a live oak tree qualifies it can be registered in the Society at no cost to the owner. All monies supporting the Society are furnished by contributions, along with a small budget of the Louisiana Garden Club Federation Inc.

Further information may be obtained by writing to the chairman at 3609 Purdue Drive, Metairie, LA 70003 or e-mailing her at CPL70600@aol.com.

The Live Oak Society website, which has the history and the registry of all oaks in the Society can be visited at: www.louisianagardenclubs.org

**The Live Oak Society
of the
Louisiana Garden Club Federation, Inc.**

Registration

WHERE DOES THE TREE LIVE?

State _____

Parish or County _____

City or Town _____

NAME YOU WISH TO GIVE THE TREE _____

GIRTH or circumference of tree (measured 4 to 4 1/2 feet from the ground): _____
feet _____ inches.

SPREAD of tree (from farthest tip to farthest tip) _____ feet.

LOCATION of the tree (exact location, street and house number, or in relation to highway)
TOWN and CITY and Zip Code. (Please list all requested information)

NAME OF OWNER _____

ADDRESS OF OWNER _____

NAME AND ADDRESS OF SPONSOR (if other than owner)

_____ REMARKS,
if any _____

Note: Junior League Tree-Minimum girth of eight feet to sixteen feet.
Centenarian-Girth over sixteen feet.

Please mail this form to:
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