How Old Is This Oak?
Determining the age of Quercus virginiana

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Note: The words written are purely by personal observation and research and are not based on any scientific data.

Grown in only 14 states in the United States the live oak, Quercus virginiana, has long been a subject of controversy as to the determination of its age. It can be found in swamps, on coastlines of the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and on higher ground farther inland. It has been grown for its sculpture and beauty, for its food for wildlife and for its valuable timber in shipbuilding, furniture-making and flooring.

Let us discuss its growth habits first. Unlike many of the Quercus family the live oak is a sprawling oak. Its branches can reach out 150 feet from its trunk and curve along the ground then upwards again towards the sky. This is the most natural form of the live oak and if it is not pruned as a young oak it will automatically grow in that manner. The crown is usually rounded in form and does not reach the height of most oak species, preferring to spread itself on the earth rather than reach for the sky.

This particular characteristic is what makes the live oak such a popular place of salvation during a hurricane. It has been documented that during many destructive hurricanes in Louisiana residents took refuge in the branches of the oaks to escape the floodwaters. The people tied themselves to the massive branches and the rounded canopy buffeted the winds thus preventing them from being ripped into the force of the hurricane. In Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama the live oak is looked upon as a tree of protection. On the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana there are oak trees still standing where there are no longer any towns because of destruction by hurricanes that occurred over a century ago. The strength and resiliency of the live oak in nature’s fury cause it to be admired and revered.

The people of Louisiana have selected it as an icon of their own survival in a harsh and dangerous natural environment.

The federal government realized the value of the live oak for shipbuilding. President John Quincy Adams subsidized the first tree farm in the history of the United States in Florida in the 1820’s. He estimated the growth from an acorn to a tree with desired wood heavy enough for shipbuilding would be 100 years. As in many government projects it was plagued with political intrigue and was eventually transferred to the Pensacola Navy yard commander where the project perished. However, the oak grove still stands today and because of someone’s incompetency the oaks have enjoyed life these many years. Ships are no longer made of oak, but steel, and oak wood is used by the Navy only for restoration of their old and historic vessels.

There is a question that is almost unanswerable when it comes to the live oak—“how old do you think this live oak is?” The only true tests for the age of a live oak are cutting it down and counting the rings or core boring. Cutting it down to determine the age would be foolish. The only accurate way of dating any living tree is to
“core” it by removing a cylinder of wood from the interior of the tree in order to count the annual growth rings. Large live oaks are almost impossible to core because of the exceptional hardness of the woods. The cores break off within the tree before they can be removed intact and counted. Unless someone has planted the tree from an acorn or there is documentation of the tree when it was planted it is very difficult to determine the age.

Foresters have decided that the live oak national champion in Lewisburg, Louisiana, is over 1200 years old. It has a girth of over 38 feet. The founder of the Live Oak Society, Dr. Edwin Lewis Stephens, in 1934 declared through his studies of the live oak, that a tree 16 feet in girth was a century old. And, therein lies the continuing discussion.

Some live oaks in City Park in New Orleans have been growing for 200 years and have reached the girth of only 14 feet. Some live oaks in residential landscapes have been growing for only 25 years and have already reached the girth of 9 feet. And, the controversy goes on.

Longue Vue Gardens in New Orleans. The oaks were planted in 1850.
Many factors determine the growth of *Quercus virginiana*. Just like most trees the important combination of light, soil and water are needed. In the case of an oak in Jefferson, Louisiana, named Old Dickory, all three factors were exact. It lived in a little forest that enjoyed the natural mulching and nourishment of the other trees; it lived near the banks of a natural stream, and it enjoyed the warm, southern coastal light. It was left undisturbed for centuries until recently when it was saved from a roadway project by a driving force of preservationists. It is determined to be between 600 and 900 years old. Left to its own growth ways and nature a live oak is the king of the forest because its heavy, forceful branches push away other trees. Its roots are also heavy and spread as wide as the canopy. The sheer weight of a live oak makes it superior to most trees in a forest.

Live oaks have been used to line allees. The most famous world known allee is Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana, and the age of these oaks are always debated though it is known that the house is over a century and a half years old. St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans has an oak allee of many miles and they have survived almost 80 years of automobile traffic, foot traffic and air pollution. History records when these oaks were planted but no one recorded how old the oaks were at the time of planting. And, the controversy continues.

City Park in New Orleans has the largest stand of live oaks in the world. An inventory in 1983 revealed that at least 250 of the oaks had a circumference of at least 10 feet. History proves that this forest of live oaks began hundreds of years ago when an old bayou was a tributary of the Mississippi River and flowed through the area feeding the oaks each year with alluvial soil. All of these oaks vary in size and it is believed that the smaller ones are probably the progeny of the older trees. Yet no one really knows the true age of each, yet in a few of the ancient ones estimates are very close.

Plans are underway to plant several young live oak seedlings at an Agricultural University in Louisiana and to study their growth for at least a century. Though you and I will never know the findings of this study it will perhaps help with the answer to the question “How old is this oak?”

Children are dwarfed by a single limb of “Old Dickory.”

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Live Oak grove in City Park in New Orleans. There are over 1000 ancient oaks in City Park varying in age from 200 years old to 700 years old.

"The Walking Oak" in City Park in New Orleans. It is believed to be 250 years old.

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