

Georges Hall is only about 10 km (6 miles) from Parramatta and from there the direct route to Victoria is by ship from Sydney which would pass by these oak trees. So it seems to be very logical that the source of seed brought from Georges Hall in 1840 and planted in Alphington was from the oaks in Paramatta.

Not only is the Alphington oak tree probably the oldest in Victoria, but it is probably a descendant of the oldest oaks in Australia, and intimately connected with the history of Australia as well.

---

## Trials and Tribulations of Germinating Acorns

by Susan Cooper

---

For my sins, I have this urge to grow oak. The demands of oak are rather different from many other trees, and fraught with many extra problems. The aim is to obtain fresh acorns, not over-dried, straight from the parent tree -- kindly sent by friends overseas, if necessary. However, this is not as simple as it would seem. Many acorns - particularly in the white oak series - are in an unseemly hurry to germinate, and will do so virtually as soon as they hit the ground.

This is not a good idea, so how to discourage them without overstepping the rather fine line between not drying enough or drying too much? Not drying enough, one has the unenviable task of unraveling a mass of radicles which may or may not be partly rotted, on arrival through the post, or a few weeks after collecting; and then risking them through the winter. Too much drying, and the viability drops like a stone. So, what to do? A good clue when sending is to include a small amount of dry peat to the polyethylene bag. This will mop up extra moisture and so prevent the acorns sweating and then germinating in transit. Another tip is to spread acorns out in the fridge before bagging, to cool the "field heat," and prevent them from cooking themselves in the bag. This should also help to shake out some of the maggots, because you can be certain that you will have those as well! Who can recommend a suitable insecticide + fungicide acorn dressing which does no damage to the acorns?

Acorns I have collected, cooled and dried a very little, I bag into thick poly bags together with just-moist peat, and stow them in the fridge until spring. If they still sweat, I know I must dry them some more. Too-dry or germinating acorns I store in the same way, but in the case of dry ones I will soak in the spring to re-vitalize them if possible.

In the spring, which in England is at the beginning of March, when, in theory, the worst of the frosts are over, I disentangle the radicles of the foolhardy, even reducing the length of the most impatient by an inch or two. I then pot these up to the tall narrow version of 2 liter black poly pots in a good commercial compost. This is about pH 5.5 and includes loam, grit, and bark, as well as 9-month fertilizer. My own mix proved insufficient to satisfy large Quercean appetites over a season! Those acorns not in such a hurry are moved in their bags to my warm mouse-free porch and urged to get a move on. Unfortunately, this summer, the urging proved rather too much with the sudden onset of a heatwave in May, and some got cooked!

Being somewhat short of time and space, I hesitate to sow anything that has not proved itself by germinating, but the wait can last months with drier acorns. Those that are potted up are moved into the greenhouse with plenty of mousetraps. It is too upsetting to contemplate rare acorns, say, from Japan or Korea, ending up as an English mouse's dinner!

Surplus acorns go into my Dunneman bed, an 18" deep frame filled with spruce litter, which I have enriched with soil manure and fertilizer, and which is wired all around. But here something nasty is lying in wait for them. Despite my best efforts with Gamma BHC, and even turning the whole thing out and starting again, this some-



*Quercus myrsinaefolia*. Myrtle Leaf Oak.

thing eats off the emerging radicles of germinating oaks, but not those of other trees which are there. There is no more pitiful sight than the easily pulled out weak seedling, revealing a minute root stub. How the thing survives at all amazes me! I have never been able to catch the culprit. Others which have avoided this lurgy and have got off to a good start, lose colour on their second flush of leaves. Is this Magnesium deficiency, I ask myself? Any solutions to these problems will be greeted with gratitude!

How to tell whether an acorn is going to grow into a nice little seedling? The answer is, I often don't. If it is energetic enough, even if a maggot drops out it will still grow successfully; but when it turns black or squelchy, I know that I have gotten it wrong! Both ends are vulnerable to fungal infection during storage and germination, and if anyone has any clues on how to combat this will they please let me know? Many's the time I have removed from its pot the sad squelchy brown root of a defunct acorn that had been germinating well. Over-watering is not my sin.

At this stage you will be wondering - what is she doing still trying to grow oak? Well, there is something about a nice plump acorn that is quite irresistible; and when I have my annual crop of beautiful seedlings, in spite of everything, I find that it has all been worth while.