

A Tree Tale: *Quercus semecarpifolia* Sm. in Cornwall

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In June 2011, Charles Snyers and I visited Tregrehan Garden with its current master, Tom Hudson. A very knowledgeable plantsman in a long-line of family members who have left their mark in Tregrehan Garden, he has continued this tradition and since 1987 has made the 20-acre woodland garden his passion and responsibility. Tom was born and raised in New Zealand and has traveled extensively there and in other exotic and wonderful places, collecting and learning.

When Tom tells the story of his champion *Quercus semecarpifolia* Sm., it starts with a letter found in an old trunk in the attic one day...

“My dear Carlyon,

*It is so hot down here that I find it impossible to write decently. I only came down from the hills yesterday... I am writing to tell you that I have sent you a box containing some seeds of *Quercus semecarpifolia* in charcoal ... the acorns may have all germinated on the way as they germinate here almost as soon as they fall to the ground but I hope that some of them, if they have germinated, will reach you alive. This species of oak covers the highest hills in Yarmsa & grows at elevations above the spruce & mixed with the silver fir, so should do well with you. It is very hardy grows very slowly & makes a fine tall straight stem if grown in close canopy.”¹*

And so our tale also begins in these lines written on the first of July, 1894, by Gilbert Rogers, a Cornish forester working as an instructor at the Indian Forestry School in Dehra Dun, NW Provinces, to Jovey Carlyon whose family had been established at Tregrehan House since 1565.

Out of those “...seeds of *Quercus semecarpifolia* in charcoal...” sent by Mr. Rogers, grew a tree that today measures more than 25 m and, though we had no instrument to measure this precisely, we guessed easily more than 2 m in circumference at breast height. It is a magnificent tree standing proudly on its 118 years, the main stem devoid of branches a good half the way up and scattered with epicormic shoots from top to bottom. It is no wonder that coppicing produces luxuriant growth. About 15 years ago, from one of these juvenile shoots, Tom successfully grew a tree that is planted in another area of the garden and today measures about 8 m. The propagation facilities at Tregrehan House are remarkable and, not any less so, Tom’s propagation skills. He successfully roots oak cuttings (and many other rare plants) quite regularly.

Certainly one of the most magnificent of the *Quercus* section Asian oaks, *Q. semecarpifolia* displays brilliantly yellow catkins that can measure up to 12 cm long and that accompany very nicely the golden underside of the leaves. This distinctive color is lost on older leaves that become hairless and while young



Epicormic growth on *Quercus semecarpifolia*. (Inset) The toothed leaves characteristic of juvenile and vigorous growth. photo©Charles Snyers



Young tree with protective structures

photo©Charles Snyers



Tom Hudson taking cuttings from *Quercus lamellosa* Sm. photo©Charles Snyers



Part of the formal garden at Tregrehan House photo©Charles Snyers

leaves or those on coppice shoots have teeth, older branches have entire-margined leaves (hence the name “*semecarpifolia*” which means half-*Carpinus*-leaved). The manner in which the leaves are all assembled in tight, upright rosettes – whether in tree or shrub form – reminds me of *Quercus inopina* Ashe.

Quercus semecarpifolia is a high-altitude oak (2100m to 3800m) ranging up to the timberline in the Himalayan region and forming the climax community on the southern aspect; it is considered to be one of the oldest plants of the region. It is also one of the most over-exploited species and fails to regenerate adequately both in disturbed and undisturbed habitats.

Q. semecarpifolia can grow to 30 m tall, but it grows quite often as a scrubby oak in its natural habitat. According to Frank Kingdon Ward, “In Sichuan, trees of up to 30 m have been recorded, but in Tibet it remains a low growing plant, typically 2-3m.”².

This species was described by James Edward Smith in 1814. Mr. Smith, aside from being a well-known botanist of his day, had the great fortune of acquiring Linnaeus’ library of over 3000 volumes for the modest sum of £1000 after Sir Joseph Banks declined the offer that had been made by Linnaeus’ widow. He then went on to create the first Linnean Society of which he was to become the first President. “I should sow acorns in light mould and water them heavily every day, as they are accustomed out here to a soil saturated with water as soon as they fall from the trees. They will stand, and in fact prefer, a great deal of shade” continues Mr. Rogers in his 1894 letter to Mr. Carlyon. It is an interesting observation that I have not found echoed anywhere else.

There is another very old *Q. semecarpifolia* in the United Kingdom growing in Hampshire, planted by J.S. Gamble (Director of the Indian Forestry School in Dehra Dun) who received acorns from Chakatra in the northwest Himalayas in 1900. Mme Aimée Camus would later name an oak to honor Mr. Gamble : *Q. gambleana* (now referred to as *Quercus oxyodon* var. *tomentosa* M. Deng & Z.K. Zhou).

The Tregrehan woodland garden (www.tregrehan.org) is an enchanting place. As one passes through the more formal plantings to enter the woodland it is a bit like being Alice (in Wonderland) except that the odd creatures that one encounters are not the Cheshire Cat or the Mad Hatter but rather *Quercus tatakaensis* Tomiya, *Quercus pannosa* Hand.-Mazz., *Quercus lamellosa* Sm. and countless other very rare individuals indeed. Happily, unlike Alice, who couldn’t have any token souvenirs from Wonderland, we left Tregrehan with several little pots of treasure.

Notes

¹ Many thanks to Tom Hudson for permission to reproduce this extract.

² Ward, Frank Kingdon, *Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges*, 1926.