

An Oak Named after My State

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Hello! Let me introduce myself. My Name is Larry Burford, from Taylor, Arkansas. I live in southwest Arkansas, just a mile from the Louisiana state line, so I live in the swamps and thickets that most people associate with Louisiana, not Arkansas. We have snakes, alligators, wild hogs, ticks, red bugs, and fire ants, to name just a few of the unpleasant things that lurk in our woods, along with the more pleasant things—the native trees.

I am a native of Arkansas: just an average American man who loves the world he lives in. I am not a botanist or a biologist and I don't have a college degree of any kind. Sometimes people ask me if I would do anything differently if I could live my life over again. I would have to say "Probably not!" Everything has worked out well for me; I have a good job, a nice country home, and a beautiful family—could anyone ask for more?

Where I differ, perhaps, from some other people is that all my life I have had a love for the outdoors. This extends beyond an interest in hunting, fishing and camping to a real curiosity about all of the plants and trees that are found in the





Quercus arkansana Bodcau Bayou with Guy Sternberg photo©Larry Burford, Jr.

woods in my part of the United States. When I was only five or six years old I can remember filling my pockets with acorns and feeling that I had found some sort of treasure. It was about this time in my life that I planted my first acorns. I was visiting my great grandmother in northeastern Arkansas, and while I was there I gathered some acorns from a huge white oak (*Quercus alba* L.) tree in her yard. I brought them home to southwest Arkansas and planted them. From one of the acorns that I collected that day I now have a 40-year old white oak growing beside the pond on my property. Every time I see the tree it connects me to my great grandparents and their home place where I collected those first acorns. It's a very special tree to me.

As I grew older I joined the Future Farmers of America and the forestry team at my high school. I couldn't have cared less about the pulp-wood and saw-log parts in our forestry competition; what I loved was tree identification. When I

joined the team, I received and still have my copy of a book called *The Trees of Arkansas* by Dwight M. Moore. It was published by the Arkansas Forestry Commission in 1973. This little book kindled a fire that is still alive in me all these years later. I began to comb the woods, searching for every kind of tree that I found listed in the book. There were several that really interested me; actually, they were the ones that I had not been able to find in my area!

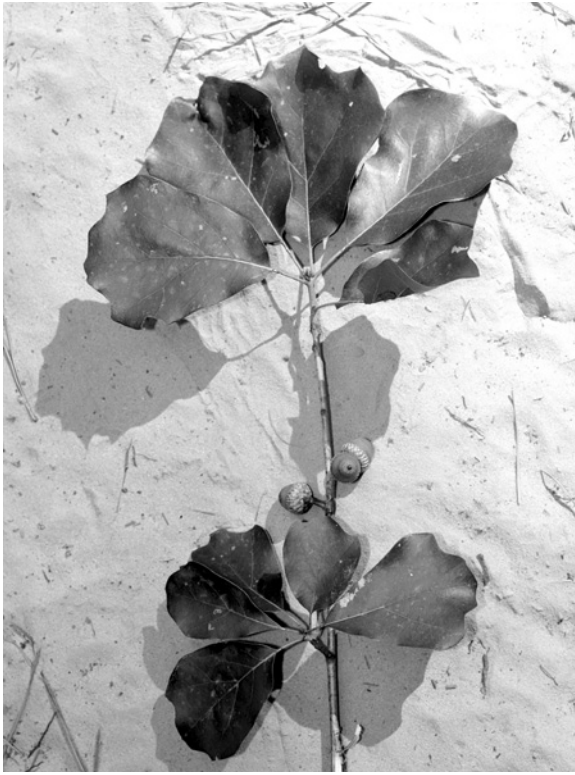
When I was in my early 30s I somehow learned about a new organization called the International Oak Society and that it had a seed exchange program for its members. The first person I wrote to was Guy Sternberg. Since that time Guy and I have remained in touch and I regard him as a very good friend. He has visited me here in Arkansas on several occasions and he is always welcome here. I exchanged seeds with many people from around the world and, thanks to them, I have planted many exotic trees on my property. The last time I counted, I had about 150 different species of trees and shrubs on the ten acres (~3 hectares) around my home.

However, one tree continued to elude me in my search for native Arkansas trees: this was *Quercus arkansana* Sarg. This tree is so rare that it is listed in the Global Tree Specialist Group Red List as globally vulnerable for extinction. I looked for years, but I was never able to locate the elusive Arkansas oak anywhere that I hunted, hiked, or visited. Of course, I could have gotten seed from someone else, or ordered a seedling from a mail-order rare-plant nursery, but I wanted seed from a tree growing naturally in my area.

Eventually, just by luck, I found a grove of huge specimens of the Arkansas oak only twelve miles from my house! I found these trees when I was actually out looking for *Castanea ozarkensis* Ashe, the Ozark chinquapin. The oak trees are actually located just across the state line in Louisiana, not Arkansas. That particular day, I was on Bodcaw Bayou about a mile west of Sarepta, Louisiana, where I was searching the high sandy banks for chinquapin trees. I found a few small chinquapins that day, the first time ever. This caused me to walk farther south along the bayou looking for more chinquapins. I hadn't walked far when I noticed some strange looking oaks growing along the bank. From a distance I could not figure out what they were. As I approached the trees it hit me that these must be ARKANSAS OAKS! And so they were. I waited until autumn and went back to take photographs and gather acorns. From that first collection I now have a nice thirty-foot tall *Quercus arkansana* growing in my back yard.

One of the first people I contacted to tell of my find was Guy Sternberg. I collected seed and sent them to Guy and several other IOS members, so I imagine there are now several more trees scattered around the US and Europe that came from "my" grove of trees. A few years back Guy brought a group of IOS members by my place and I took them on a tour of the area. The grove of Arkansas oaks was one of the places I took the group. I have never enjoyed meeting a group of people more than those that Guy brought with him that day. I did my best to show them as much as possible in one day, and I feel that everyone enjoyed themselves; I know I did!

Quercus arkansana apparently hybridizes with *Quercus falcata* Michx., and several small trees have been found that have traits of both of these species where they occur together in Arkansas; this fact is apparently not widely known. I have



Arkansas Oak on sandy soil

photo©Larry Burford, Jr.

collected some F2 seeds from this hybrid and several IOS members have had an opportunity to test them.

The summer of 2011 was the hottest and driest in recorded history here in southwest Arkansas and northwest Louisiana. We had over fifty days of more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38° C), with several days above 110 degrees (43° C). Most of the summer days that didn't have highs above 100° were in the high nineties. These conditions were disastrous for crops, as well as for other plants of all kinds. Acorn production was very low, with most acorns aborting because of the extreme heat and drought. I checked my grove of Arkansas oaks on 16 October 2011 and found that three of the trees had died due to the stressful summer. Luckily, the two largest trees on the site have survived, as have most of the smaller trees.

The location where my Arkansas oaks grow is on a high sandy hill beside a stream; the trees are well above areas that flood. The surrounding forest has *Quercus alba* (white oak), *Quercus falcata* (red oak), *Quercus nigra* L. (water oak), and *Quercus phellos* L. (willow oak), along with *Liquidambar styraciflua* L. (sweetgum), *Pinus taeda* L. (loblolly pine), and *Nyssa sylvatica* Marsh. (black

gum). As the land slopes down to the stream there are *Taxodium distichum* (L.) Rich. (bald cypress) and *Quercus lyrata* Walt. (overcup oak). We are on the border between U.S. Department of Agriculture Plant Hardiness Zones 7 and 8, but some of the seedlings from acorns that I have collected and distributed have survived under Zone 5 conditions.

It has been a thrill for me to find and grow such a rare tree that was originally discovered in my home state (Fulton Arkansas, in Hempstead County) and to share it with others. These are the moments that inspire people to teach their children about nature and become members of organizations such as the International Oak Society!



Author with Arkansas Oak at Burford Arboretum photo©Larry Burford, Jr.