Oglethorpe and the Oglethorpe Oak

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A newcomer to the white oak group, rare in the wild and in cultivation, commemorates the founder of Savannah.

In March of 1994, a young oak tree from the state of Georgia was planted in a walled garden at the Meath Home, Godalming, England, to commemorate a famous son of Godalming, General James Oglethorpe, founder of Savannah, Georgia. The connection between this picturesque Surrey town and an oak from the "Peach State" may seem tenuous, but the tree chosen for the planting was, very appropriately, the Oglethorpe oak (Quercus oglethorpensis W. H. Duncan). A few years previously, the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum, which holds the United Kingdom's national collection of oaks, had managed to obtain seed of this distinct and unusual species collected in Georgia and were pleased to be able to donate a young tree for the planting. The place of planting was also significant, for the Meath Home was originally Westbrook Place, the home of James Oglethorpe.

James Edward Oglethorpe, reputedly the last person to shoot snipe in Piccadilly, was born in 1696, the son of Theophilus Oglethorpe who that year had settled in Godalming, Surrey, where he had earlier bought the manor of Westbrook. The family were keen supporters of the Jacobite cause, particularly James' sisters, Anne and Eleanor, who were involved in several plots; there were even rumors that Prince Charles Edward secretly visited Westbrook to plan the 1745 rebellion.

James himself kept aloof from such matters, and after education at Eton and Corpus Christi College, Oxford, spent his early life as a soldier in Europe. He returned to Godalming at the age of twenty-five to take up his inheritance and succeed his brother as member of Parliament, soon earning a reputation as an ardent social reformer, concentrating particularly on the injustices of the prison system. He found time to interest himself in local affairs and is recorded as donating a guinea here and there to local causes. He added to his estate by building a great wall of local Bargate stone to enclose a vineyard that soon became well known for its white wine.

Meanwhile, the idea of forming a new colony in America had been suggested and Oglethorpe was one of the prime movers in the project. It would be named after King George II and would occupy the space between the Carolinas and the Spanish settlers in Florida—far enough south...
to grow grapes and to produce silk, for it was reported that mulberry trees, grown to provide food for silkworms, were likely to flourish in the area. Georgia thus became the thirteenth British colony in America. Godalming's wealth was founded on wool, so there were plenty of local people skilled in producing textiles, and some of these, with others attracted by national advertising of the opportunity to start a new life, made up the 120 settlers who sailed with Oglethorpe from Gravesend in November 1732. They reached their goal on February 12, 1733, still annually celebrated as Georgia Day, and within a few weeks had laid out the rectangular street plan of the city of Savannah.

Each family was given three lots, space for a house, a five-acre garden on the edge of the settlement, and forty-five acres in the neighboring countryside to be cleared for farming. On the edge of the town Oglethorpe created a ten-acre Trustees' Garden to try to find the best conditions for growing mulberries and other plants, now acknowledged as the first agricultural research station in America.

In a letter to Sir Hans Sloane dated September 19, 1733, Oglethorpe apologized for not having time to "make a collection of such things as might be agreeable to one of your curiosity." He did, however, send specimens, and some thirty-eight collections are held in the Sloane Herbarium at the Natural History Museum in London. Annotated with pre-Linnaean names in Oglethorpe's own hand, these consist of a variety of mainly herbaceous plants but certainly include a specimen of poison ivy (Toxicodendron radicans; synonym Rhus radicans).

The Trustees' Garden had auspicious beginnings. With sponsorship from Sir Hans Sloane and the Society of Apothecaries, and advice from Philip Miller of the Chelsea Physic Garden, many plants of potential commercial importance were introduced, including white mulberries, oranges, peaches, figs, pomegranates, olives, vines, and cotton, as well as vegetables to supply the needs of the expanding colony. Cotton and peaches still remain two of the major commercial crops of Georgia. Unfortunately, the garden soon became neglected and many plants were killed in a hard frost in March 1738. It continued to supply mulberry trees, which were available to planters free of charge, until about 1748, but was eventually abandoned and converted to residential use in 1755. A bronze marker, commemorating the 250th anniversary of the founding of the garden was erected on the site in 1983.

The local natives, the Yamacraw tribe, responded favorably to the colonists' overtures of friendship, and when Oglethorpe returned to England he took with him ten of their number, including Chief Tomochichi. They met the trustees of the colony, the King and Queen, and caused quite a stir in Godalming when their host took them to dinner at the White Hart.

On his second voyage, James was accompanied by the brothers John and Charles Wesley, family friends who were going to minister to the spiritual needs of the colonists and the natives. The government's idea of funds for running the new colony proved miserly, and the estate at Westbrook had to be mortgaged to raise the necessary money to keep it going. Once back in Georgia, Oglethorpe founded the settlements of Frederica on the coast and Augusta farther up the Savannah River. He then made one more quick trip to England to try to raise a regiment to meet the growing threat of Spanish invasion. The expected blow fell in 1742; the invaders were defeated at the battle of Bloody Marsh and driven back into Florida, for which achievement James Oglethorpe was rewarded with promotion to the rank of Brigadier General.

The following year he returned to England for the last time, married, did a little more soldiering in Europe in the service of Frederick the Great, then retired to the country, where he died at the age of eighty-eight. Oglethorpe is still honored in the state that grew from his colony. His statue stands in a square in the center of Savannah; the map of Georgia shows Fort Oglethorpe City and Oglethorpe County; and Oglethorpe University was founded in Atlanta. The City of Savannah has proposed the restora-

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tion of the Trustees' Garden on its original site. It would surely please the General's philanthropic heart to know that his house in Godalming has been run for one hundred years as a home for epileptics, and it is good to record that it has been presented with an Oglethorpe oak to grow in the walled garden that the founder of Georgia knew so well.

While James Oglethorpe's involvement with Georgia goes back more than 250 years, the Oglethorpe oak is a relative newcomer to the genus, described too late to be featured in C. S. Sargent's two-volume work Manual of Trees of North America (1905) or The American Oaks by William Trelease (1924), but in time to be included in a list of additions and corrections in Volume 3 of Les Chênes by Mme A. Camus (1952–1954). It was originally noticed as distinct as late as 1940 by Wilbur H. Duncan of the University of Georgia in Athens, who, in the company of Professors G. N. Bishop and A. D. McKellar, found trees growing in abundance on Buffalo Creek near Lexington, Georgia. These trees had previously been thought to be Quercus imbricaria (shingle oak), but further investigation by Duncan showed them to represent an unnamed species that he described as Q. oglethorpensis. An earlier collection made by T. G. Harbison from Elbert County, Georgia, was also referred by Duncan to this species. The name does not commemorate James Oglethorpe directly, but Oglethorpe County, in which the trees were found and the type specimen was collected. In 1950, Duncan reported the finding of Q. oglethorpensis by Professor Bishop in Greenwood County, South Carolina.

The Oglethorpe oak makes a large tree to 25 meters (80 feet) or more in the wild, the young shoots sparsely covered with stellate hairs and glands at first, becoming smooth and deep red in winter. The deciduous, elliptic to obovate leaves to 13 centimeters (5 inches) long are usually without teeth and often with wavy margins, but can be slightly lobed, particularly on vigorous shoots of the second flush (as seen in the illustration). They emerge bronze-tinged, becoming a rich, glossy green, and remain on the tree late into autumn when they can turn briefly red, then brown. When they first emerge, they are dotted with short-stalked red glands above and with sparse stellate hairs, becoming glabrous, while the undersides are thinly covered with persistent stellate hairs. The acorns
mature the first year and are ovoid, about 11 millimeters (1/2 inch) long and one-third enclosed in the cup, which is sessile or shortly stalked. Although originally confused with *Quercus imbricaria* (a red oak), the Oglethorpe oak is not closely related to that species and is, in fact, a white oak. It is considered by Duncan to be a relict species closely related to *Q. margaretta*, and a tree found by Duncan in Oglethorpe County appears to be a hybrid with this species.

Oglethorpe oak is of very restricted distribution in the wild, confined to two isolated populations, with its main range in a few counties in the Piedmont of northeast Georgia and neighboring western South Carolina. It is found on poorly drained bottomlands and neighboring slopes, uplands, and stream terraces associated with *Acer rubrum*, *A. saccharum* subsp. *leucoderme*, *Celtis laevigata*, *Fraxinus pennsylvanica*, *Quercus alba*, *Q. falcata*, and *Q. pagoda* (formerly *Q. falcata* var. *pagodifolia*). In the wild it is susceptible to chestnut blight. Until an extensive study of its distribution by Haehnle and Jones, Oglethorpe oak was known from only forty-five sites. They added another one hundred to this and considered that its absence from five of the previously recorded localities was due to land clearance for agricultural development. It was also suggested that although populations of Oglethorpe oak had probably not been seriously affected since its discovery, it was likely that prior to this, agricultural development had reduced the range of the species and its population density. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources describe it as threatened in the wild and its habitat has suffered clearance for agriculture and forestry. Oglethorpe oak has recently been assigned endangered status by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.

Oglethorpe oak has also been reported from other states. The population found near Copenhagen, Louisiana, is, according to Dr. Kevin Nixon, *Quercus sinuata* (formerly *Q. durandii*), but what appears to be *Q. oglethorpeensis* was reported by Wiseman from three sites in the Bienville National Forest, Scott and Jasper Counties, Mississippi.

In cultivation, both in North America and Britain, this species is uncommon. Plants growing at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum date from two accessions; firstly, scions received in 1978 were grafted onto *Quercus robur* and planted in the early 1980s, and secondly, plants derived from seed collected in the Oconee National Forest in Jasper County, south of Monticello, Georgia, in late 1988 by Marshall Adams. The Meath Home plant derives from the latter collection. In spite of its southern American origin, this species is proving reasonably hardy in cultivation. At the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum the oldest specimens have made bushy plants up to 3.5 meters (11 feet) tall with a spread of 4.5 meters (15 feet), often branching from just above the base.

In Britain, young shoots of this species are frequently damaged by frost during winter, when temperatures typically reach 20 degrees Fahrenheit or below, but this is probably due to the lack of sufficient summer heat to ripen adequately the growth rather than winter cold, which can be just as or more intense in the southern United States. As a result of winter damage here, the plants grow slowly and usually produce numerous young shoots in summer from the frost-damaged wood.

That the poor performance of this species in Britain is due to lack of summer heat rather than low winter temperatures is clearly shown by plants growing at the Morton Arboretum in Illinois. There, plants grown from seed collected in Greenwood County, South Carolina, have reached 3 meters (10 feet) tall in fifteen years. In the winter of 1993–1994, following ideal conditions for wood ripening the previous autumn, little injury was incurred even when temperatures fell to minus 22 degrees Fahrenheit. However, growth that occurs late in autumn and does not ripen properly can be injured at a temperature of zero.

Also in Illinois, at Guy Sternberg's Starhill Forest, near Petersburg, this species grows slowly but has survived even the coldest winters undamaged. Further south, Oglethorpe oak grows more vigorously, and on the campus of the University of Georgia, Athens, ten- to twelve-year-old trees have reached 6 meters (20 feet) tall and 5 meters (15 feet) in spread with
coarse, scaly bark. The leaves remain until late autumn when they turn brown and (on these young trees) remain through winter. Planted trees can also be seen at the Oglethorpe County courthouse, Lexington, Georgia.

Judging by specimens in the Kew herbarium collected by Duncan near Lexington, Oglethorpe County, Georgia, in 1942, this species comes into leaf much earlier in its native habitat than it does in Britain. Whereas at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum and the Morton Arboretum it is normally well into May before the foliage starts to emerge, a flowering specimen collected on April 18 already had the young leaves opening, while a specimen in full leaf was collected on July 12. In cultivation in Savannah, the leaves emerge in mid- to late March.

Although the Oglethorpe oak is unlikely to make a tree suitable for landscape use either in Britain or the United States, its historical associations with James Oglethorpe, as well as its rarity, make it of great interest. Oglethorpe oak is rarely available from nurseries, but plants can be obtained from Woodlanders, Inc., 1128 Colleton Avenue, Aiken, South Carolina 19801.

Bibliography


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