



# HIDDEN TREASURE OF THE ARBORETUM

Fall color starting to appear on daimyo oak foliage in the Arboretum. (Photo by Daniel Mount)

## Daimyo Oak

BY DANIEL MOUNT

**W**e're all familiar with the expression "You can't see the forest for the trees." But I find that it can sometimes be hard to see the trees for the forest! This seems especially true in parts of the Arboretum, where mature collections have grown to massive proportions and much of the flowering and other fun stuff happens out of sight, way up in the canopy.

One section of the Arboretum where it can be tricky to appreciate the traits of individual trees is the Oak Collection. Just steps away from the Graham Visitors Center, it is an often overlooked corner of the park, except in autumn when you might find mushroom hunters rustling through the fallen leaves. (Note: Foraging is forbidden in Seattle city parks!)

A total of 316 oaks—representing around 80 species and cultivars—grow in the Arboretum, making the collection an important one. They can be found from one end of the park to the other, but the highest concentration is just to the west of the Visitors Center, and many of these trees date back to the early days of the Arboretum. All our oaks are part of a nationally accredited multi-site collection administered through the Plant Collections Network of the American Public Garden Association.

There are many rarities in the Arboretum collection, but one oak in particular is of special interest for its stunningly large leaves—the daimyo oak (*Quercus dentata*). It is also known as Korean oak and Japanese emperor oak (*daimyo* were powerful feudal rulers in Japan, from the 10th to mid-19th centuries). As you might have guessed, the tree is native to Japan and Korea; it is also found in the wilds of northeastern China.

Our specimens arrived as fresh seeds in the fall of 1937 from Mrs. O.B. Thorgrimson, who received them from the Arnold Arboretum. (Thorgrimson was one of the original advocates for the Arboretum back in its infancy.) Upon receipt, they were planted immediately in the nursery because acorns have a very short viability period. In the spring of 1946, the young trees were planted out in the Arboretum. Five still stand today at the northeast end of service road that runs through the Oak Collection; another three from the original batch can be found at the south end of the collection, on the west side of the Loop Trail, just south of the Wilcox Bridge.



**TOP:** Daimyo oak leaves are among the largest in the genus *Quercus*. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

**BOTTOM:** The hedgehog-like acorns. (Photo by Daniel Mount)



not currently thought of as a very garden-worthy plant. For one thing, its large size at maturity makes it unsuitable for most urban gardens. What's more, its eventual shape can be somewhat angular and irregular. In his "Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles," W.J. Bean wrote: "of ungainly and un-picturesque habit when old."

A couple of very slow-growing cultivars—*Quercus dentata* 'Carl Ferris Miller' and 'Pinnatifida'—have been selected, and these are unlikely to expand out of proportion in the average garden. In addition, their forms are more desirable: 'Carl Ferris Miller' develops an oval-to-rounded crown, while 'Pinnatifida', sometimes called the cutleaf emperor oak, has a narrow, upright habit. The latter also bears stunning, deeply cleft, fernlike leaves that are very unusual among oaks.

In Japan, daimyo oak is frequently found in gardens; but there it is judiciously pruned to keep its size small and its shape appealing. The Japanese also use the tree for bonsai, and each May, in celebration of Children's Day, they serve a special sweet called *kashiwa mochi* (sticky rice cakes filled with red bean jam) wrapped in the large oak leaves.

Daimyo oak does best in full sun and acidic, well-drained soil. It can be hard to come by in local nurseries, but thanks to the foresight of the Arboretum's first supporters and staff, the plant is easily found here. What's more, our specimens have been allowed to retain their lower branches, so the fabulous foliage is easy to appreciate from ground level. While you're visiting, check out some of the other wonderful oaks in our nationally important collection. 🌿

Most are veritable giants today, ranging between 40 and 60 feet. They offer beautiful corky bark and very large, broadly lobed, egg-shaped leaves. The leaves are among the largest in the genus, reaching up to a foot long and seven inches wide when fully expanded. Another salient feature is the acorns, whose bristly cupolas cover nearly half of the nut, making them look like little hedgehogs when they fall among the leaves come autumn.

Given its scientific name in 1784 by Carl Peter Thunberg—the Swedish botanist who was one of the first Europeans to gain access to Japanese plants—daimyo oak did not arrive in the West until decades later. Often planted in parks and arboreta in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it is

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