

## Ensuring We Will Have Live oaks in the Future

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Our stately live oaks are admired by local residents and visitors alike. They are long-lived trees, so guessing at the age of an unusually large specimen is a favorite topic of conversation when one is sighted. The tree's shape is also attractive, and if it happens to be laden with Spanish moss, it draws even more attention by visitors to our area.



At some point in time, these mature trees will succumb to natural or man-made damage, and some will simply die of old age. In order to ensure that live oaks will continue to enhance urban and suburban areas we should be planting young ones. There is an old saying: "The best time to plant a tree was yesterday, and the next best time is today."

Not all live oaks are the same. There are two different species, the standard live oak, which is *Quercus virginiana*, and the sand live oak, which is *Quercus geminata*. When selecting a young tree for landscape use, it is important to match the right species to the local environmental condition.

*Quercus virginiana* is the tree that we usually think of as the classical live Oak. It is the larger growing of the two species and is well adapted to typical Gulf Coast urban and suburban landscapes.

*Quercus geminata*, also known as the sand live oak or twin live oak, is the better choice for certain locations. Though it is very similar to the standard live oak, there are some very important differences. It is better adapted to the most harsh coastal conditions where direct salt spray and deep sands are found.

The best way to determine which of the live oak species is best for a particular piece of property is to see which is growing naturally in the area. A good southern tree reference will contain information that will be helpful in identifying which species is present. Basically, sand live oak trees are somewhat smaller at maturity. The leaves are also smaller, more rolled under at the edges and the veins are more depressed. This species is also known as the twin live oak because the acorns are borne in pairs.

### Selecting and Planting a Live Oak:

Select a planting site where the tree will enhance the property or provide needed shade. Live oaks can reach a large size, so allow plenty of room. Do not plant a young tree near the foundation of the house.

Decide upon the size of the tree that will be planted. Live oaks are available in many sizes, from small trees in one gallon containers to very large balled and burlapped and container grown specimens. A six foot tall container grown tree is probably the best choice for most homeowners and gardeners. The transplanting of extremely large trees is best left to a professional or to individuals with the knowledge and equipment to handle them.

Choose a live oak that has been produced from local stock. Though it would be difficult to visually determine, there are different biotypes. A tree produced from parents within the same geographical area is much more likely to thrive than one that is shipped from far away.

Select a tree with a straight single trunk. The branches should emerge at right angles to the trunk and be well spaced. Avoid a tree with multiple, or forked trunks and branches that arise from the same point.

Dig the planting hole only as deep as the root ball and twice as wide. Set the plant in the hole so that the top of the root ball is even with the top of the surrounding grade, or slightly higher.

Trees should be established in the native soil, so use no soil amendments in the hole when planting. Mulch beneath the newly planted tree using coarse material such as pine bark. Mulching should begin at the edge of the root ball and extend outward. Don't place mulch on top of the root ball.

Water is the most important ingredient once the tree is planted. Regular irrigation will be required until the tree is well established. The soil should be kept moist, but not overly saturated.

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[\[Back\]](#)