

This champion scarlet oak is located in southeastern Kentucky. Scarlet oak like most oak species in Kentucky is important to wildlife and for lumber purposes—it is also often used as an ornamental tree.

Scarlet Oak – A Witness to History

by Diana Olszowy

Kentucky Champion Tree Program

Photo courtesy: Kentucky Division of Forestry

The city of Pineville, seat of Bell County was first settled in 1781. Rich in history from the native Americans who first passed through to the early pioneers and settlers traveling on the Wilderness Road to the new land of Kentucky, on through the ebb and flow of the Civil War. Originally called Cumberland Ford, the community was developed at a shallow crossing on the Cumberland River at a gap in Pine Mountain called The Narrows. Although not as well-known as nearby Cumberland Gap, The Narrows was also a key passage on the Wilderness Road that led early settlers from the East into Kentucky.

From the beginning, one truly magnificent scarlet oak stood its ground as the city grew around it. This massive oak is nearly 14 feet in circumference and 98 feet tall. But the most impressive feature is its crown spread which is nearly 100 feet. Though normally considered a medium-sized tree with an average circumference of 2 – 3 feet and a height of 60-80 feet, this champ was obviously not interested in the status quo.

Scarlet oak, also known as Spanish oak, is best known for its brilliant autumn color. It's a fast-growing tree that can be found in a wide variety of soils. It prefers the upper slopes and ridge tops of the central Appalachians. In Kentucky, it is common except for in the far western region. It commonly grows with white, black, and chestnut oaks; shortleaf and Virginia pines; mountain laurel; sourwood; and blueberry. What is particularly interesting about scarlet oak is that it tends

to be better represented in forests with a fire history than in forests with little or no evidence of past burning. Its prominence on burned sites may be related to its vigorous sprouting ability after burning, together with the elimination of more fire-sensitive competitors.

Scarlet oak is a type of red oak and is used for flooring, furniture, millwork, railroad ties, tool handles, fence posts, plywood, veneer and barrels for storing dry goods. The wood is hard, heavy, strong, and pink to reddish-brown. The acorns are an extremely important food source for deer and for bears as they fatten up before hibernation. Turkeys, ducks, grouse, quail, songbirds, blue jays, woodpeckers, raccoons, chipmunks, squirrels and other wildlife also rely on the scarlet oak acorns for food.

In addition to its value as a timber and wildlife species, scarlet oak is widely planted as an ornamental. Its brilliant red autumn color, open-crown texture and rapid growth make it a desirable tree for yard, street, and park. With everything that this champion scarlet oak has seen through its long life, don't you wish it could share its wisdom with us?

Scarlet oak leaves are bright green above and pale below until they turn a brilliant scarlet color in the fall. The acorns of scarlet oak reach about 1 inch in length and often have concentric rings at the bottom tip of the acorn.

Leaf and acorn photos courtesy: David Stephens, Bugwood.org

About the Author:

Diana Olszowy is Stewardship and Education Branch Manager with the Kentucky Division of Forestry. She is also an editor of the Kentucky Woodlands Magazine. Kentucky Division of Forestry, 627 Comanche Trail, Frankfort, KY 40601; Phone: 502.564.4496; Fax: 502.564.6553; E-mail: diana.olszowy@ky.gov