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Grow Your Own Oaks Trees

Oak trees are great additions to many landscapes. However, buying a tree can be expensive. Luckily, there is another option: starting your own tree from a seed. As we enter fall, and many oaks start dropping acorns, it is prime time to start your next oak tree from seed. Thad Rhodes with the KS Forest Service shared the following tips on growing your own oak trees from acorns.

First, collect acorns as soon as the seed is mature. This is typically when the acorns drop from the tree. Other signs that a seed is mature include browning of the acorn (turning from green) and when the acorn slips easily from the cap.

Be selective as you collect seeds. Collect seeds from trees with good form, as they will be more likely produce higher-quality trees. Consider the landscape location of seed trees and planting locations (e.g. pick hillside trees for planting on hillsides and creek bottom trees for planting in lower areas). Select the largest available acorns, as they will have more energy to initially feed the seedling.

Once you have your seeds, keep them from drying out. Try to collect freshly-dropped seeds if possible. Soak acorns in water for 2 days, changing water 1-2 times per day to rehydrate them. Before you start the germination process, test to see which seeds are viable. If you are able to remove the cap of the acorn, place it in water to see if it floats. Those that float are generally no good; those that sink are viable. If caps cannot be removed, collect extra acorns to allow for a certain percentage of “bad” seed.

Depending on the type of oak you are growing, you can plant them in the fall or wait to plant them in the spring. Oaks are divided into two groups: white oaks and red oaks. White oaks have rounded leaf tips, like the Bur oak, Chinkapin oak, White oak. White oaks will germinate in the fall and can be planted right away. One exception is the burr oak, which can be held over to the spring

Red oaks, on the other hand, have pointed leaf tips, like the Northern red oak, Black oak, Pin oak. Red oaks will need to go through a period of time exposed to cold and damp conditions in order to “wake up.” We call this stratification. This can be done by field planting in the fall and allowing mother nature to provide cold, snowy weather. Keep in mind that your seeds will be at the mercy of animal predation and at risk of drying out if it is a warm/dry winter.

You can also simulate stratification in the refrigerator and then plant in the spring. To do this, put fully-hydrated seeds in gallon ziplock bags with dampened peat moss. Soak the peat moss in water and then squeeze out excess moisture so it is damp, not drenched. Then place the bag in the crisper drawer. Be sure to label bags with species name, collection date, and landscape setting (or other details that might be important for determining planting location). Monitor seeds in early spring and plant once the root begins emerging (or just before); the main item is that the root not be damaged during planting.

When you are ready to plant the acorns, dig a hole twice as deep as the seed’s height. For a larger seed, you will need a deeper hole, and for a smaller seed, a shallower hole. At each planting location, plant three seeds – especially if you are planting in the fall or did not float test the seeds. After sprouting, seedlings can be thinned to a single plant. You can protect planting areas from animal damage by installing cages (or similar barriers).

For more details, you can find the US Forest Service Woody Plant Seed Manual available on the US Forest Service website. Plants in this manual are listed by scientific name (e.g. Bur oak will be under “Q” for *Quercus macrocarpa*).