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Oaktober: Nailing colors to the mast

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Oregon white oak, also known as Garry oak, was once widespread in the Pacific Northwest.
(Journal photos by Alex Féthière)

It's Oaktober. Masting trees like our native Oregon white oak (*Quercus garryana*) have been the foundations of ecosystem resilience for millennia. "Masting" means crop-producing, and it derives from the Middle English word "mete" (meat), a generic term for food.

The *Quercus* genus is the granary of wildlife including squirrels, bears and deer, and it has been valued as food and feed by humans who have fostered it as part of our community. *Quercus* is a keystone genus: they provide so many benefits to hundreds of species that they have an influence disproportionate to their population.

Once widespread throughout the Pacific Northwest, the Garry oak distribution has narrowed due to a number of causes, not the least of which is lumber forestry. It's ironic that the tree once excluded by the Coastal Salish tribes has come to dominate our regional ecology.

These tribes (and others, like the Kalapuya of Oregon's Willamette Valley) used to burn the forests to exclude Douglas fir from their oak-dotted prairies, and encourage the development of favorable guilds, or associations of plants. In OSU Press's "Indians, Fire and the Land in the Pacific Northwest," one researcher described this indigenous valley lifestyle as a "pyroculture," and the Willamette is called "the most intensively fire-managed environment in the aboriginal Northwest."

The Oregon white oak was key to this managed ecology all the way into Vancouver. Canada is encouraging Garry oak reforestation with pamphlets like "The Garry Oak Gardener's Handbook," which explains how to recreate the diverse meadow polyculture anchored around these trees. South Sounders will recognize many of the landscape and edible plants that thrive in the dappled shade of oaks, e.g., nodding onion, broadleaved stonecrop, and camas lily.

Camas lily is known more for its beautiful flower than its food value. Its edible bulb has long been prized as a native food, and for our purposes is cooked in a pressure cooker (nine hours) or steamed on a wood stove (all day). For the tribes that practiced pyroculture, it was traditionally eaten after burning the prairie: the bulbs were baked in the ground.

Unfortunately the 1850 Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, which has had consequences beyond camas cuisine, has foreclosed this traditional method. After over a century of misguided policy,

the Forest Service has partially reversed this practice, and once again benevolent fires tease the oaks to drop their acorns.

Our grandfather of oaks has dropped some acorns that I've taken to my nursery. Perhaps the most famous of the South Sound's Garry oaks is the Jack Davis Oak in Olympia. This tree, believed to be four centuries old, narrowly avoided destruction during highway improvement in 1984. Named for the environmentalist who spearheaded its rescue, it has a folk association with Oregon Trail pioneer Ezra Meeker. I expect to plant out my Davis-Meeker oaks this season, along with a large number of non-pedigreed Garry oaks and another variety that produces more edible acorns.

Anyone who has nibbled on an acorn has probably wondered what critters and people see in them. The Coastal Salish baked them, ate them with salmon eggs or pounded them into a meal to accompany fish. Nutritionally, acorns resemble corn. Most preparations of acorns involve an extensive period of leaching to remove tannins.

Tannins impart a face-withering astringency to acorns as a deterrent to fungi, bacteria, fire and critters, and they appear throughout the vegetal world. Think of the complexity they lend wine. Fittingly, the word "tannin" comes from the Celtic root "tann," meaning "oak" — maybe some anthropologists are correct that humans, over the millennia, have eaten more calories from acorns than we have from wheat.

This could only have been possible with leaching, which even squirrels accomplish by burying acorns to let the soil draw out the bitterness. This technique has worked for tribes who leave acorns in mud for up to a season. The meal can also be soaked in repeated changes of water until sweet, then dried or cooked.

Although I haven't seen any talk about eating acorns, some states celebrate these integral trees during Oak Awareness Month. This Oaktober, let's get to know our garryana a little better.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*