

Bur Oak – A Nebraska Native

By: Pam Bergstrom, Lower Elkhorn Natural Resources District Forester

Let me just say that I am a sucker for oaks and one oak that I admire and adore is the Bur Oak. This regal 'king' of the forest is tall, dark foliaged, and handsome! Growing to a height of 80 feet or taller and having a crown spread around 60 – 80 feet wide, this gentle giant needs room to grow but does well in windbreaks settings, out in the middle of pastures, and handles the stresses of city living such as pollution and compaction. It handles being in wet areas and has attributes of being drought tolerant to a point.

And, get this, it is a native tree to Nebraska. I should point out that its native range is from down in Texas all the way up into Canada. That is quite an area to cover! Though, several specimens have been planted in Anchorage, Alaska and are doing extremely well except for the fact bears LOVE the acorns and are sometimes found in town chowing down on them.

Bur Oak reminds me of the turtle, it grows slow and steady unlike other trees such as the Silver Maple or Cottonwood that are more aggressive when it comes to growing quickly. While the Bur Oak may take a little longer to establish and grow, it is long lived, living over 200 + years. The Lewis and Clark Bur Oak at Ponca State Park is estimated to have been living when, well, Lewis and Clark made their famous journey up and down the Missouri River back in the early 1800's.

If you are looking for a tree that is wildlife friendly, then you have found it with the Bur Oak. The acorns are a good food source for wildlife ranging from squirrels to deer and is also a sturdy tree for a deer stand as well. The robust branches provide great nesting sites for song birds. And, as mentioned before, acorns are a delicacy for bears, especially the black bear, but you shouldn't worry about that here in Nebraska.

The Bur Oak will produce acorns every year, but every second or third year will yield a massive crop. An old wives' tale tells that if the Bur Oaks have a massive crop yield in the fall the winter will be hard. Another old wives' tale states that if squirrels start harvesting the acorns before they reach maturity it will be a long, drawn out winter. Remember, these are just old wives' tales so there is no science to back up these tales. Acorn production is hampered by how much energy the tree has to produce the acorns in the first place, how much rain/nutrients are available to the tree, and the overall health of the tree.

As a young tree, the Bur Oak only needs about 6 hours of sunlight a day during the growing season, but as it gets older it requires at least 8 hours of sunlight during the growing season. This makes Bur Oak a great replacement tree, especially if the tree that is going to be replaced is still standing and would shade the younger replacement tree. This is a good replacement for ash trees that are in areas where Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) has been detected.

So, how about fall color? Well, Bur Oak will change to a golden yellow in the fall and before the leaves fall off the branches they will turn to a brown color. They are a site to be seen in the fall with their massive leaves turning golden yellow with acorns scattered around the tree. I know a lot of folks are looking for bright, crisp red colors in the fall, but don't overlook trees that turn yellow or even orange!

Native Americans would take the acorns and pound them into a flour like substance and use them for baking and also as medicines. Some tribes would use the acorns and also the inner bark to treat heart pains/problems and as an astringent paste (to close open wounds). Other medical treatments include insect bites, poison oak/ivy treatment, and body cramps.

Today, Bur Oak is utilized in windbreaks, wildlife plantings, riparian forest buffer plantings, urban plantings, and in areas where this gentle giant can grow. A wonderful tree that doesn't get the recognition that it deserves . . . until now!



Photo Courtesy of <https://nature.mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/field-guide/bur-oak-burr-oak>



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