

Valley Oaks

The City of Visalia officially protects Valley Oaks with a strong and enforced ordinance, which states:

The citizens of Visalia are fortunate to live among the largest remaining stand of native Valley Oaks in the Central Valley. These magnificent trees need to be protected during development, so they will survive for the next generation. The City's Valley Oak Ordinance establishes policies for the care, trimming and removal of Valley Oaks. Residents and developers are required to ensure the protection of these magnificent trees and must obtain permission to remove or prune Valley Oaks.

When a Valley Oak must be removed, a mitigation fee is imposed and the money is saved in the Oak Tree Maintenance Fund, which is used to plant Valley Oaks in public areas and helps low-income residents maintain their trees. There are standards for building near Valley Oak trees, and developers must submit a "Valley Oak Tree Management Plan" before beginning a project.

Oak Growth

The California White Oak or Valley Oak (*Quercus lobata*) commonly grows to more than fifteen feet in circumference, with the largest specimen recorded a massive 28 feet in circumference. The largest Valley Oak living today is in Tulare County (in the yard of a home between Tulare and Visalia) and has a circumference over 23 feet.

The Valley Oak leaf canopy is wide and full. The branches start growing up at an angle, but as they lengthen they become pendant; some twigs reach to the ground from mid-tree height. Each branch twists and turns, with barely a foot of straight wood before the next branchlet.

The leaves appear in March, starting out a light, bright green, but soon they take on a solid mid-green shade with a dusty tint. The leaves vary from tiny – 1 inch long – to 7 inches or more. They can be deeply lobed and sharp-toothed or rounded and soft, all on the same tree. Often larger leaves are near the trunk, where they grow bigger to photosynthesize better in the shade.

Inconspicuous flowers appear in March and April about the same time that the leaves come out. Some oaks flower and leaf out earlier than others,



Two leaves from the same Valley Oak tree



Valley Oak flowers



This eight-year-old oak is slowly straightening its trunk.

but by mid-April all oaks should be in new leaf. The pollen is an allergen to some people. Acorns start forming in May and continue to grow until the weather cools. Then the caps dry and they fall. The leaves drop in mid-December.

The trunk is sturdy but often bent – small trees are likely to lean to one side or the other, making up for the slant by growing more branches on the other side. Most will straighten as they age by putting wider growth rings where needed until the trunk is upright. The bark on mature trees is dark gray-brown, with deep v-shaped furrows making patterns. Scars and burls add character with interesting growth patterns that show on the outer bark.



Acorns

The long, sharp-pointed acorns fall copiously in many years, less so in others. The California Ground Squirrel collects them as do pack rats (Mexican Wood Rats and other species). Early settlers watched grizzly bears gather in the late fall and camp under the trees feasting. They pulled down branches to get at

the acorns and even sent the cubs up into the trees to break off acorn-laden branches and throw them down.



Northern Flickers and Acorn Woodpeckers also collect these seeds. They “plant” them in utility poles and other dead wood. Crows and jays sometimes pick them up and drop them on the street to crack them, but these birds much prefer the walnuts, pecans, and almonds that grow wild all over Visalia.

Acorns were a staple food for the Yokuts Indians who lived here, but they preferred the Black Oak acorns which they gathered as they made their way down from their summer camps in the foothills. Black Oaks occur above 2500 ft. altitude and do not grow well on the valley floor.

The first white people to record a trip near Visalia probably came near to what is now Mooney Grove Park in about 1806. These were Spanish explorers from the coastal missions, who were looking for stolen horses as well as a possible place to establish an interior mission. They never did set up a mission – it was far too difficult to get here through the swamplands around Tulare Lake. Communication and supplies would be

almost impossible. Plus the natives were not very hospitable; they had probably heard about what was going on along the coast and wanted no part of it. But the Spaniards were impressed with the dry areas above Tulare Lake and the majestic oaks that gave them needed shade.

When settlers arrived in this valley, many areas were park-like, with large oaks all about and native grasses growing underneath in their protection. Early settlers found the oaks in their way and cleared many of them to make way for farms, while they realized the value of the trees for shade and always kept some around their homes. By the early 1900s the loss of oaks was being noted, as in this article from the Bakersfield Morning Echo newspaper in 1904.

*It is a very sad fact to record that those fine groves of handsome oak trees that nature planted about the country between Tulare and Visalia are being rapidly wiped out by the wood-chopper's ax. Many of the finest of them have already been reduced to a dreary stretch of stumpage and others are dotted with the white tents of the destroyers. Since the first settlers came to Tulare County, these oak trees have been its chief feature of beauty and attractiveness. They have tempered the weeds in winter and summer. They have been a godsend to the picnicker and the wayfarer and have given the country a picturesque, woodsy and home like appearance in sharp contrast to desert plains both to the north and south. (Quoted by Terry Ommen in *Historic Happenings Newsletter* April 2010.)*

The wood is fair for firewood, although it burns quickly and leaves lots of ashes.