

Quercus lobata - Valley Oak

During the eighteen months I have been in Saratoga, the beauty and diversity of the trees to be found here have made a deep and lasting impression. Though a European student and admirer of trees for the last fifteen years, I was not familiar with many of the ornamental trees of this part of the world except through books and reading. Therefore, I am doubly honored to be invited to contribute to the series of articles on the trees of Saratoga.

In frequent discussions with specialists about the indigenous trees of this community, I have learned that many regard the oaks as the heritage to be most cherished. Among the native oaks growing in this immediate vicinity are the coast live oak, Quercus agrifolia; interior live oak, Quercus wislizenii; maul oak, Quercus chrysolepis; scrub oak, Quercus dumosa; California black oak, Quercus kelloggii; tanbark oak, Lithocarpus densiflora; and valley oak, Quercus lobata. The latter, the subject of this article, is the most outstanding native tree in the west valley region. To fully appreciate these magnificent spreading trees, one must see them from a vantage point overlooking the entire area.

In its native distribution, this species is strictly Californian and does not occur in the wild anywhere else on earth. It can be found in the warm interior valleys from Shasta and Trinity counties south to Ventura County. The best groves inhabit the rich lands of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys as well as the valleys of the eastern foothills of the coastal mountains.

One of the authorities on the trees of California describes the valley oak as "a graceful tree commonly 40 to 75 feet but rarely 100 feet tall, with a great crown which in typical form is broader than high and whose spreading limbs finally end in long and slender pendulous branchlets reaching nearly or quite to the ground". As it grows in the vicinity of Saratoga, the pendulous habit of this oak does not seem to be as marked as in the larger interior valleys.

The leaves of the valley oak usually do not fall until late December. The Latin name lobata refers to the shape of the leaves which are nearly parted to the midrib into three to five pairs of lobes. The acorns reach their full size and maturity in the fall. They are mostly between two and three inches long. The cup of the acorn is drab-brown and very warty. The long and conical nut is at first bright green and later on chestnut-brown. The valley oak has the longest acorns of all California native oaks.

The location of Saratoga in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains, protected from the direct influence of the ocean, offers a satisfactory environment for the development of this tree. Numerous specimens of varied ages can be found here. Among the finest examples are three individuals located along the Saratoga-Los Gatos highway. The first of these is the City Library tree, with a branch spread of 65 feet. Two other specimens even more characteristic are located about one-half mile east of Saratoga beside the Los Gatos highway on the property of Mr. and Mrs. Carl F. Mau. The tallest of these two stately trees is about 70 feet and has a trunk diameter of almost six feet at three feet above the

ground. Both can easily be seen from the highway or in the Mau garden at 19990 Belle Vista Avenue.

The great size frequently attained by these oaks is the result of favorable locations having fertile loams with a water table of twenty to forty feet rather than the very old age of the tree.

Several old timers of this area describe the valley oak as the dominant tree of the Santa Clara Valley before the growing of prune and apricot orchards finally relegated the species to private gardens or locations not useful for horticultural purposes. A reason for the preservation of many fine specimens of the valley oak within the city limits of Saratoga was explained to me by an old time tree lover who pointed out that most of the oaks along Fruitvale Avenue are Quercus lobata. He said that Fruitvale was once an important County road, and the trees were maintained by the County to give shade to the horse and buggy traffic. These beautiful trees, together with many others in the community, are still here ready to delight the eye of the resident and visitor alike.

Gerd Schneider
Circa 1959