Getting to Know Your Trees - White Oak

Mother Nature's Moment - February | March 2021
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Almost every month we come to you with new information about trees. This month, and on and off in the months to come, I am going to try to introduce you to some of our good friends in the tree family.

The best way to learn the names of trees is to "get to know them". The same way you get to know a new friend. First you learn their names, then you can remember their name when you see them and recognize their face and hair and the color of their eyes. Then, as you get to know them really well, you can tell what they look like from a long distance away, because of the way they walk or talk or have unique expressions or characteristics. It all becomes very familiar to you. You even learn to recognize them no matter what they are wearing or if they have had a hair cut. *You KNOW them!*

Eventually you will be able understand trees the same way, as you "get to know them". First you learn their names, then the way their bark and shape looks and feels. You can learn about their leaf shapes and patterns. You can learn about their unique buds which will help you identify them in the winter. You can learn their colors and the way their flowers look.

White Oak, *Quercus alba*
the Illinois State Tree

winter structure or silhouette

With each tree introduction you will see photos of the trees with their names and pictures of their different characteristics to help you begin the process of "knowing them".

Gilbert and I, after all these years of working with trees, can often identify specific species of trees even if we are driving by them on the expressway at 65 mph and it is winter.

We look at things like branching structure. Knowing about whether a tree has alternate or opposite branching structure really helps to narrow down what kind of tree it is. There are MANY more species with alternate branching structures than there are with opposite structures. Maple, Ash, Buckeye, and Dogwood are the predominant species with opposite branching structure so you can easily narrow things down if you make that distinction.
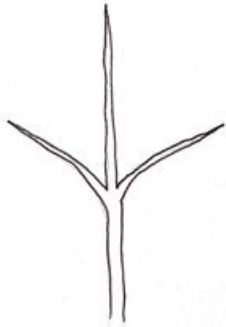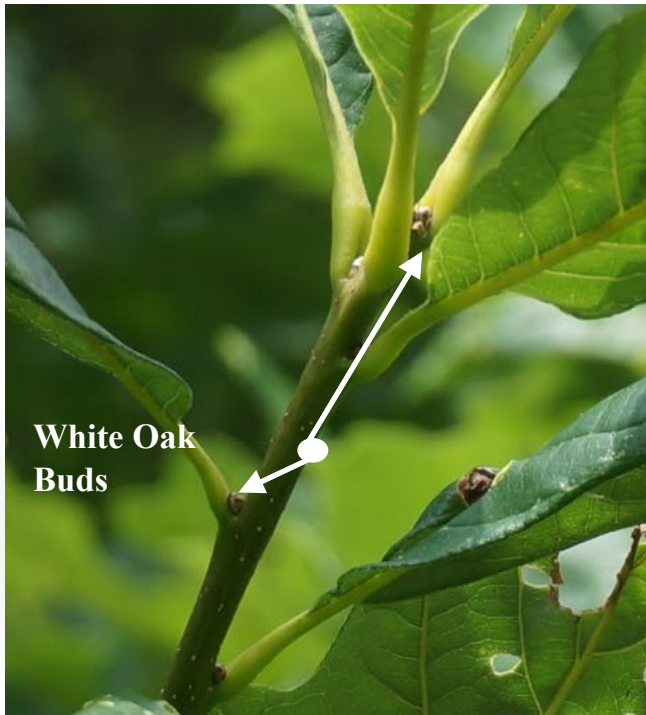
alternate structure   opposite structure

So how do you tell the difference between opposite and alternate? The diagram at the left illustrates this. It is best to check out the twigs and branches at the tips of the tree to get a good example.

On with our White Oak…

White Oak Buds

White Oak Bark

White Oak Bark

I love this photo of buds because it demonstrates that the buds for next spring are formed in the summer before. You can see the little buds peaking out from under the leaf stem. Note the leaves with their alternate pattern.

This is a classic image of White Oak leaves in the autumn of the year. The colors can range from yellow to burgundy red with this orange in the middle. The shape and form of the White Oak leaf is one of my favorite. Its look is a lot like a human hand, with its deeply lobed sinuses and rounded edges.

Here is another beautiful image of a White Oak in winter, and as Gilbert likes to say, the branches come away from the trunk in an almost horizontal fashion as though it is reaching to hold up the sky.

There are few trees in my opinion that have the same grandeur as the form of a White Oak.

Below is a detailed image of a White Oak bud ready for next spring to explode with new life.

Upper left and lower photos are the delicate new spring chartreuse leaves of the White Oak. The lower photo also shows the White Oak flowers. Yes, every tree flowers, but most of us never notice those delicate little flowers on the trees. Maybe this next spring you can pay closer attention.

Some fun facts about White Oaks: Illinois, Connecticut and Maryland all have the White Oak as their state tree. George Washington commissioned the USS Constitution in 1794 which is still in service today and was constructed of White Oak wood. White Oaks get their name from the whitish color of the undersides of the leaves. Bourbon is aged in barrels made of almost exclusively White Oak. White Oaks can grow to 80'-100' and can live up to 500 years! Have fun getting to know the White Oaks around you!