



UNIVERSITY OF
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IFAS EXTENSION

Laurel Oak or Swamp Laurel Oak? ¹

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There is a difference between Laurel Oak, *Quercus hemisphaerica* Bartr., and Swamp Laurel Oak, *Quercus laurifolia* Michx. These two oak trees are found commonly throughout Florida and the southeastern coastal plain from Texas to Virginia and occasionally inland as far as Tennessee. These popular cultivated species occur in different habitats in nature which could affect survival and growth.

Quercus is a classical Latin name. *Laurifolia* means laurel-leaved or having leaves like a laurel. *Hemisphaerica* alludes to the hemispherical crown of the tree. Both trees can reach over 100 feet in height and have a full rounded crown. The trunks are usually straight with the lower limbs falling, leaving the first branches of a mature tree quite a distance from the ground. Bark is smooth on young stems and branches becoming ridged and quite dark with age. Branches and twigs are slender and the lower branches are spreading. Leaves are shiny and evergreen falling in late winter or early spring. The leaves are elliptic, or occasionally broader toward the tip, 2 to 6 inches long, 1/2 to 2 inches wide, pointed or rounded often with a bristle at the tip, and pointed or rounded at the base. Sometimes leaves can be 3 or more lobed at the tips. As with all oaks the male and female flowers are separate. The male flowers occur in short, hairy,

hanging spikes. The female flowers are found singly or in twos on short, stout stalks on new growth. The fruit is a dome-shaped acorn up to one inch long and wide and is often wider than long. The cup holding the acorn is quite shallow.

Laurel Oak, *Quercus hemisphaerica*, is found in sandy soils and is frequently weedy throughout its range. In addition to open woods, it occurs in disturbed areas, cut-over forests and old fields. This species has leaves that are smooth on the lower surface. Another characteristic on mature trees is that the majority of leaves on a branch will have bristle tips. Swamp Laurel Oak, often called Diamond-leaf Oak, occurs in wet areas such as flood plains and low forests. It frequently has tufts of hair in the axils along the main vein on the lower surface. The majority of the leaf tips on a branch of a mature tree lack bristle tips.

These attractive trees grow rapidly, but are somewhat short-lived with maturity being in the range of 25 - 50 years. The spreading limbs, broad rounded crown, shiny leaves, rapid growth and straight trunk make this a popular shade tree. One of the undesirable characteristics is that twigs and limbs are constantly falling. The ground underneath if not

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cleaned regularly is quite trashy. Frequently planted as street trees, they are unsatisfactory due to the short life span and constantly falling twigs and limbs. Both trees produce regular, abundant crops of acorns. These fruits are important for wildlife, being eaten by squirrels, raccoons, deer, ducks, quail and various other birds.

If you choose to plant these tall trees, they should be placed in the proper setting with plenty of room to grow and to provide safety from the falling branches. Laurel Oak should be used for drier settings and Swamp Laurel Oak for wetter spots. For identification, remember that only the mature plants can be used and that Laurel Oak leaves have many bristle tips and are smooth (hairless) on the lower surface. Swamp Laurel Oak has few bristle tips and tufts of hairs in the axils of the veins on the lower surface along the midrib.