

## Plant An Oak In 2020: Make A Home For Insects And Animals

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Jan. 3, 2020



A blue oak tree stands in the Tehachapis Mountains in Kern County, Calif. This tree species is sensitive to winter precipitation and was used to reconstruct the Sierra Nevada snowpack over the last 500 years. (Photo: K.J. Anchukaitis)

**Q:** Over the holidays, I was reading about the insect apocalypse. I've decided to include planting an oak tree in my New Year's resolution list. I read that oak trees provide the most habitat for insects.

Do you have a recommendation as to which species of oak I should plant? I live in the Redding area.

**A:** What a fabulous resolution! We need more trees planted, and oak trees are an especially valuable tree for the environment.

The Santa Barbara Botanical Gardens lists oak trees as a “keystone species — a species that serves as the backbone of the ecosystem, and without which the ecosystem would fail.”

Not only do oaks produce acorns and leaves for deer and other animals to eat, but hundreds of species of insects rely exclusively on oak trees for survival. The latter include many caterpillars and oak gall-forming wasps.



TreesAcadiana volunteer Theresa Rohloff measuring live oak trees at the Lambert's home in Lafayette, LA. Tuesday, Sept. 10, 2019. (Photo: SCOTT CLAUSE/USA TODAY Network)

Douglas Tallamy, in his book “Bringing Nature Home,” claims that an oak tree supports over 4,000 different species of insects and animals, more than any other tree.

For the oak tree to support the most insects in your neighborhood it's best to plant a tree from a local source, as plant genetics can vary from different parts of the state. Many native insects only feed on local native plants. Several California native oak species grow well in Redding including the Blue Oak, the Interior Live Oak and the Valley Oak. If you plant one of these species it's best to plant one that will grow well at your site.

- Valley Oaks need deeper soils and more water than the Interior Live or Blue Oak.
- They all require good soil drainage to grow well.
- Valley Oaks will grow faster than the Blue and Interior Live Oaks.

All oak seedlings will need some water for the first couple of years. Once established, they should be planted in a location where they will not receive regular water during the summer, as this will favor conditions that cause water molds that will kill the tree.



Live oak trees provide beauty, shade and habitat, and have become the symbol for Tallahassee living. (Photo: Cara Fleischer)

If the spot where you plan to plant the tree will get summer water, then I would recommend that you choose a Scarlet Oak or Eastern Red Oak. These will be more tolerant of summer water. These red oak species are fast-growing trees that are native to the eastern United States. Because these oaks are not native to California they may not support as many of our native insects; but they will still support some animals and insects, and will do much better in a watered

landscape.

Regardless of the species of oak tree you choose, make sure that you have plenty of room for it to grow. Valley and Scarlet oaks grow 75 to 100 feet tall. Blue and Interior Live Oaks can easily grow to 50 feet tall.

To learn more about the oaks that grow in our area and how to grow them, check out this publication from the Sacramento Tree Foundation: <https://www.sactree.com/assets/GuideToSacramentoOaks4.pdf>.

*The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email [mastergardener@shastacollege.edu](mailto:mastergardener@shastacollege.edu). The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.*