

## SPECIES OF THE WEEK



Sessile oak

*Quercus petraea*

Dair ghaelach

The sessile oak is a large deciduous tree up to 20–40 m tall, and similar to the pedunculate oak, *Q. robur*, with which it overlaps extensively in range. As oaks mature they form a broad and spreading crown with sturdy branches beneath. Their open canopy enables light to penetrate through to the woodland floor, allowing bluebells and primroses to grow below, and their smooth and silvery brown bark becomes rugged and deeply fissured with age.

The leaves are 7–14 cm long and 4–8 cm broad, evenly lobed with five to six lobes on each side, and a 1-centimetre-long petiole.

Sessile oak is monoecious, meaning male and female flowers are found on the same tree. Male flowers are rather inconspicuous green catkins produced in the spring just before the leaves appear. Female flowers are inconspicuous clusters of bracts (modified leaves), which resemble red flower buds. The flowers are wind pollinated. The fruit is an acorn 2–3 cm long and 1–2 cm broad, which matures in about six months. Young acorns are green, maturing to brown before they fall. The sessile oak is so-named because, unlike the pedunculate oak, its acorns are not carried on stalks (peduncles) but directly on the outer twigs (sessile).

Once widespread throughout Ireland, centuries of harvesting, with few trees being replaced, means that truly native oak can be hard to find, though there are small woods in most counties. Very often, semi-natural oak woodlands contain a proportion of birch and ash, with hazel, holly and rowan scattered throughout the understorey. They are found more commonly on poor acid soils, often in hilly regions. These woodlands can be found in Killarney, Co. Kerry, the Glen of the Downs, Co. Wicklow and Glenveagh, Co. Donegal, to name but a few.

Oak trees support more wildlife than any other native trees. They provide a habitat for more than 280 species of insect, which provides food for birds and other predators. The bark also provides a habitat for mosses, lichens and liverworts, and deadwood cavities for nesting birds and roosting bats. The acorns are eaten by a number of birds and mammals including the jay, badger and red squirrel. The soft leaves break down with ease in autumn and form a rich leaf mould beneath the tree, supporting beetles and numerous fungi.

In early Irish law, the oak was one of the seven 'Nobles of the Wood'. Oak timber was used for construction and furniture making, and the bark was used for tanning leather.