

Swamp White Oak (*Quercus bicolor*)

Nebraska Forest Service

Oak is one of the most common trees in the United States. Indeed there is a species of oak that grows in every state. As a matter of fact there are over 80 species of oak growing in North America. Here in Nebraska the list is a little more limited but surprisingly long. The Nebraska Statewide Arboretum and the Nebraska Forest Service list the following oaks for planting in Nebraska – sawtooth Oak, white oak, swamp white oak, scarlet oak, shingle oak, bur oak, chinkapin oak, pin oak, chestnut oak, English oak, red oak, shumard oak, black oak, blackjack oak, and Gambel’s oak. Not all of these oaks grow in all locations however and it is important to do a little research on unusual species.



The swamp white oak (*Quercus bicolor*) is an excellent tree for Nebraska. Swamp white oak is actually a lowland tree and is native throughout most of the northeastern United States and as far west as Iowa and south to Arkansas. While swamp white oak prefers rich deep wet to even poorly drained soils, it also does well on dryer, compacted sites. Trees that can tolerate wet sites can often do well on compacted sites since their roots have developed to grow in low oxygen soils.

The largest swamp white oak in the United States is located in Highland, VA and is 300 inches in circumference, 68 feet tall with a spread of 49 feet.



Quercus means oak in Latin and *bicolor* means two colored. The leaves of swamp white oak are dark green above and silvery white underneath. When breezes blow in the summer the silvery underside contrasts with the dark green upper leaf surface and that is the reason for the term “bicolor”. The bark tends to become flakey as the tree gets older. Swamp white oak starts out with a pyramidal shape but as it grows it becomes more rounded and spreading. There are very few pests of swamp white oak and it is a relatively easy tree to transplant. It is a fast growing tree once established a healthy tree will grow one foot or more in height per year.

Swamp white oak can have problems on high pH soils but this is not always the case. If the tree is going to struggle it will show it within the first few years after planting. Swamp white oak tends to hold its leaves after fall coloration and they fall off gradually through the winter months. Fall color is yellow with some orange.

In the forest industry swamp white oak is used for the same purposes as white oak (*Quercus alba*). The wood is hard and dense and used for ship building, barrel staves, furniture, flooring, beams, and other uses.

As with most oaks, the acorns are treasured by the squirrels. Swamp white oak acorns can be planted when they mature in the fall. It is best to plant them outside in a protected garden area in the fall and then watch for the tree to break ground in the spring. Remember to move the tree to a more permanent location before it gets to large. Swamp white oak is an excellent tree for planting in the yard or as a woodland tree.