

STAMP STORIES

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My Stamp Stories up until now have focused on the Animal Kingdom, so I thought for this story it was time to switch to the other major biological group—the Plant Kingdom. I grew up on a farm in Ohio, and while I knew early in life that I did not want to be a farmer for a career, I would not trade growing up on a farm for anything. The experience taught me so much, that there would not be room in this column to even list it all.

One thing that all farmers must know is agronomy—the science of growing plants. Every farmer is an amateur botanist to some extent. Botanical knowledge is necessary, if for no other reason than to be able to tell the difference between crops and the weeds that infest them. Farmers are involved in observing the natural world continually, so it is not surprising that in addition to their crops, they also become knowledgeable about all sorts of other plant life. My father, mother, and grandmother, could tell you the common name of every type of flower, weed, tree, or other plant that existed in our part of the country. And they taught me the names as well.

Our farm had more than 20 acres of forested land that provided a terrific place for childhood adventures. Also, an immense tree stood in the middle of one field. The circumference of its trunk measured about 24 feet. This tree, which still stands there today, is a white oak.

On 9 October 1978, the USPS issued a se-tenant set of four stamps depicting American trees (Sc#1764–68). The third stamp in the set shows a white oak that could have been modeled after the very tree in our field.

The United States has not been very active in commemorating its tree species on postage stamps. Twenty years passed before it issued another set commemorating four species of flowering trees (Sc#3193–96).



White Oak



Charter Oak

But the white oak is an exception. Being the subject of a legend as old as the colony itself, the Charter Oak of Hartford, Connecticut, is one of the most famous white oaks in America. On 26 April 1935, the US Post Office Department issued a stamp using an image of the Charter Oak to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the founding of Connecticut (Sc#772). This design also appeared se-tenant with the designs of Sc#773, 775, and 776 on a souvenir sheet for the Third International Philatelic Exhibition issued on 9 May 1936 (Sc#778). An image of the tree also adorns the reverse side of the Connecticut state quarter.

Quercus alba is one of the pre-eminent hardwoods in America. It is a long-lived oak of the Fagaceae family, native to eastern North America and found from southern Quebec west to eastern Minnesota and south to northern Florida and eastern Texas. In the forest it can reach a magnificent height and in the open it develops into a massive broad-topped tree with large branches striking out at wide angles

Normally not a very tall tree, typically reaching 65–85 feet (19.5–25.5 m) at maturity, it nonetheless becomes quite massive and its lower branches are apt to extend far out laterally, parallel to the ground. The one on our farm had such branches, some as big around as regular trees, and these made climbing in it especially fun. The tallest known white oak is 144 feet (43 m) tall. It is not unusual for a white oak tree to be as wide as it is tall, but specimens growing at high altitudes may only become small shrubs. White oaks have been known to live up to six hundred years.

According to the 2011 National Register of Big Trees, a tree in Indiana with a circumference of 313 inches, height of 110 feet, and a crown spread of 138 feet is the largest white oak in the country.

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The white oak has served as the official state tree of Illinois after selection by a vote of school children. There are two “official” white oaks serving as state trees, one located on the grounds of the governor’s mansion, and the other in a schoolyard in the town of Rochelle. The white oak is also the state tree of Connecticut and Maryland. The Wye Oak, probably the oldest living white oak until it fell because of a thunderstorm on 6 June 2002, was the honorary state tree of Maryland.

Their acorns are small relative to most oaks, but are a valuable wildlife food, notably for many bird species, rabbits, squirrels, and deer. They were also used for food by Native Americans. The white oak is the only known food plant of the *Bucculatrix luteella* and *Bucculatrix ochrisuffusa* caterpillars.

White oak has cell structures called tyloses that give the wood a closed cellular composition, making it water- and rot-resistant. Because of this characteristic, white oak makes excellent barrels for wine and whiskey production since it resists leaking. The same benefit also derives for use in construction, shipbuilding, cooperage, and agricultural implements.



USS Constitution

The *USS Constitution* (“Old Ironsides”) is made of white oak, and its reconstructive replacement wood comes from a special grove of *Q. alba* known as the “Constitution Grove” at the Naval Surface Warfare Center located in Crane, Indiana. On 21 October 1947, the USPOD issued a stamp showing a naval architect drawing of the US Frigate Constitution to commemorate the 150th anniversary of its launching.

On 18 August 2012, the USPS issued a stamp featuring the *USS Constitution*, the most famous ship of the War of 1812.



This stamp also commemorates the bicentennial of the War of 1812, a two-and-a-half year conflict with Great Britain that many Americans later came to view as the nation’s “Second War of Independence.”

For the stamp design, the Postal Service selected a long-admired painting of the ship by Michele Felice Cornè, circa 1803. The ship acquired the nickname “Old Ironsides” during a victorious battle with a ship of the Royal Navy at the beginning of the War of 1812. The warship, which is today docked at the historic Charlestown Navy Yard, became a symbol of the young nation’s naval power and fierce independence. Today “Old Ironsides” is the oldest commissioned warship afloat in the world and is manned by a crew of active duty U.S. Navy sailors. She was officially designated “America’s Ship of State” in 2009.

The stately white oak is not only an impressive specimen of natural beauty, but also a highly useful resource providing shade for the weary, food for wild creatures, and construction material for shelter and commerce.