

Grow & Give Oaks from Acorns

A project from Homegrown National Park

What to know

Grow native oaks (*Quercus spp.*) from local acorns this fall and give the seedlings to friends and family in spring. In many regions of North America, oaks are the top keystone plant, supporting more than 1000 species of caterpillars that feed baby birds. All it takes is a few acorns, some pots, and a little patience. Every oak you give is a future keystone tree in someone's yard.

Season

Fall to collect and plant. Spring to give away.

For

Communities, Schools, Families, Teams

Event Duration

About 1 hour to collect and plant. No event needed for the giveaway. Seedlings grow for about 6 months before they're ready to give.

Instructions

Step 1 | Find Your Oaks

Acorns drop from September through November, depending on your region and the oak species. Look for native oaks near you: a park, a campus, a neighbor's yard, or your own. Try the [Seek App from iNaturalist](#) to see which oaks are native to your ecoregion. Acorns from local trees grow into trees suited to your local soil and climate.

💡 Make sure the tree is a native oak. Some common street and landscape oaks, like English oak (*Quercus robur*), are not native to North America.

Always ask before collecting on private property, and check the rules for parks and public land.

Step 2 | Collect Your Acorns

Collect as soon as you can after acorns fall. Within a week or two, squirrels, jays, deer, and insects will have taken most of the good ones. Gather more than you think you need, since not every acorn will sprout.

Step 3 | Test Your Acorns

Remove the caps and drop the acorns in a jar or bucket of water. Acorns that sink are likely viable. Acorns that float are likely not. Toss any with small holes, which usually means an insect got there first.

Step 4 | Prepare Your Pots and Soil

Oaks send down a long taproot in their first year, so deeper pots work best. Ideally, use soil dug from where the oaks will eventually be planted. Otherwise, use well-drained soil with no added fertilizer.

 Reuse old nursery pots, or ask a local nursery for extras. Clean them first so you don't pass along pests or disease: scrub off old soil, soak for 10 minutes in 1 part bleach to 9 parts water, then rinse.

Step 5 | Plant Your Acorns

Lay each acorn on its side and plant it just below the soil surface, one acorn per pot. Label each pot with the oak species and the date.

 **White oak or red oak?** Check the leaves on the tree your acorns came from. White oak group (*Quercus* section *Quercus*) leaves generally have rounded, curvy lobes. Red oak group (*Quercus* section *Lobatae*) leaves generally have pointed, jagged lobes, often with a tiny bristle at each tip. A few oaks, like willow oak (*Quercus phellos*) and live oak (*Quercus virginiana*), have leaves with no lobes at all. When in doubt, snap a photo of the leaf and look it up.

- **White oak group:** Plant as soon as possible after collecting. Most begin growing roots in the fall, sometimes within days or weeks, though you may not see leaves until spring. Don't let the acorns dry out.
- **Red oak group:** Plant in fall too, and leave the pots outside. Most need a period of cold, moist conditions (called stratification) before sprouting in spring. Winter naturally takes care of that for you!

 **Make it a group activity.** Schools, garden clubs, and workplaces can turn Steps 3 through 5 into a 1-hour planting session. Students can plant in fall, check on their oaks all winter, and send seedlings home with families in spring.

Step 6 | Protect and Water

Cover each pot with wire mesh, like hardware cloth, to keep squirrels and other critters out. Water well. Leave pots outside in a semi-sheltered spot that gets plenty of light through the winter.

Step 7 | Care Through Winter and Watch for Sprouts

Check pots every week or two. Water if the soil dries out, and keep the wire on. When your oaks sprout depends on the type:

- **White oaks** (rounder leaves) sprout in fall. They send a root down, wait out the winter, then put up leaves in spring.
- **Red oaks** (pointier leaves) sprout the following spring, after a cold winter.

Don't worry if you see very little above ground. In their first year, oaks grow about ten times more root than leaf. The real growth is happening underground.

Step 8 | Choose Who Gets an Oak

Once your seedlings leaf out in spring, think about friends, family, coworkers, or neighbors with a spot to plant one. Match the oak to their space. Some oaks stay shrub-sized, while many grow into big shade trees. A few questions to ask:

- How much space do you have?
- How much sun does the spot get?
- Are there deer where you live?

Step 9 | Hand It Off with a Gift Tag

Attach a tag with the oak species, where the acorn came from, and simple care tips. A personal note goes a long way: "This oak started as an acorn from [place]."

 Give seedlings while they're small. Young oaks transplant best, so aim for their first spring.

Remind people to:

- Plant soon, ideally within a few weeks, while the root is still small.

- Plant away from foundations, septic lines, and overhead wires. Deep soil keeps roots from lifting sidewalks and driveways.
- Put a wire cage around the seedling. Deer love young oaks.
- Water regularly through the first summer.
- Leave the leaves in the fall. Oak leaf litter feeds the soil and shelters fireflies, moths, and more.

Ask them to add their new oak to the [HNP Biodiversity Map](#), and snap a photo of the handoff.

 **Have extras?** Share them at a plant swap, donate them to a native plant library, or bring them to an HNP table.

Step 10 | Report Back and Help Us Improve!

Sharing how many acorns you planted and how many oaks you gave away is crucial. Your input directly helps us measure our collective impact and improve our resources. Did you do something special? We would love to see your photos and hear about unique details to feature and incorporate for future activities! [Contribute Your Feedback Here](#)

Materials

(Complete supply checklist)

- Acorns from native oaks
- Jar or bucket of water (for the float test)
- Deep pots, one per acorn  Reuse and clean old nursery pots
- Soil from the planting site, or well-drained soil with no fertilizer
- Wire mesh or hardware cloth, plus wire cutters
- Plant labels and a permanent marker
- Watering can or hose
- Gift tags with care tips or a QR code to care instructions
- [HNP flyers/brochures](#)

Related HNP Activities

- **Plant Giveaway or Swap:** Have more seedlings than friends? Share the extras at a spring giveaway.
- **Native Plant or Seed Library:** Donate extra seedlings to a library near you.
- **Winter Seed Sowing Party:** Pair it with oaks for a full grow-your-own season.
- **Host an HNP Table:** Plant acorns at your table in fall, or hand out seedlings in spring.

Examples



Float test



Hardware cloth cover