

Featured

Naturally: Don't overlook the mighty oak, our friend that provides

- By DR. DANA DRISCOLL Special to the Gazette
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Indiana County is home to different varieties of oak, with the most common being northern red oak (*quercus ruba*), white oak (*quercus alba*), black oak (*quercus veluntina*), and chestnut oak (*quercus prinus*).

Beautiful specimens of these oaks are found in White's Woods. One of the largest and most majestic oaks is the white oak, which can grow up to 100 feet tall and have a five-foot diameter trunk.

Oaks are a critical part of our forest ecosystems. A climax community is an ecosystem that is in the final stage of ecological succession and is stable, balanced and healthy. A common climax community here is an oak-hickory forest, which includes an overstory dominated by oaks and hickories with maple, beech, birch, cherry, tulip poplar and others. White's Woods offers an excellent example of a forest in mid-succession in transition to a mature forest. Mature climax

oak-hickory forests are rare, so it is a true treasure to be able to witness these forests in Indiana County.

Like other hardwood nut species (hickory, walnut, butternut), oaks are relatively slow-growing and long-lived. White oaks can live 600 years or more. Oaks begin producing acorns between 30 to 40 years old, and they will start to produce a full, bountiful crop of acorns at 60 years.

Oaks produce a bumper crop of nuts (called a “mast year”) only every three years. This is an ecological adaptation to prevent the populations of squirrels and other acorn-eating animals from eating the entire crop of nuts each year. Smaller crops keep rodent populations in check, and a very large crop in the third year ensures the survival of some nuts to grow into oak seedlings. Smaller crops of nuts train animals to hoard acorns, burying them in the ground and forgetting them, so that more oaks can be born.

While oak has medicinal qualities, indigenous peoples primarily used oak as a major food source. Acorns and other nuts may have been up to 25 percent to 40 percent of some tribes’ diets, supplemented with hunting, fishing, and other foraged foods. Part of the reason Pennsylvania’s old-growth, original forests had such a high percentage of oaks and chestnuts (up to 50 percent of all trees) was because Native peoples cultivated them as a food source.

With some patience, you can learn how to eat acorns, and while they take time to prepare, it is a unique and delicious treat. Begin by harvesting at least two gallons of acorns. While any acorn can be made into flour, the larger acorns are better, as the greatest labor is in cracking and shelling the nuts.

Once you have harvested acorns, lay them out in a garage or back porch for two weeks. Some acorns contain an acorn weevil; laying them out allows the weevils to exit, leaving behind a spoiled nut and a black hole. After two weeks, you can begin processing all intact acorns into flour.

Crack the nuts with a nutcracker, a rubber mallet, or cut open with a knife. Remove the nutmeat from the outer shell; fresh nutmeat should be light yellow or tan (nutmeats will dry to a darker brown). Next, loosely chop your nutmeats. Tannins in the acorns make them too bitter to eat without additional processing, so you must boil the acorns to remove the tannins.

Boil in a large pot for several hours, changing the water every 20 minutes. To change the water, use a fine strainer or cheesecloth. After two hours, start tasting your acorns. If they still taste bitter, keep boiling until they no longer taste bitter.

Once you are done boiling, dry your nutmeats, placing them in an oven on the lowest setting for about 45 minutes or in a dehydrator overnight. Finally, grind your acorn bits with a small hand grinder, a well-cleaned coffee grinder, or a food processor.

You now have acorn flour, ready to be made into cakes or breads! Store this in the freezer until ready to use.

My favorite recipe is acorn bread:

Acorn Bread:

1 cup acorn flour

1 cup all-purpose or bread flour

½ teaspoon salt

1.5 tablespoons baking powder

1 egg

1 cup milk

3 tablespoons maple syrup or honey

3 tablespoons oil or butter.

Preheat your oven to 400 degrees. Grease a bread pan. Mix your dry ingredients and wet ingredients separately, then mix them, just enough to integrate. Pour your batter into the pan and bake for 30 to 40 minutes until a knife or toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. Let cool for 10 to 15 minutes before eating. Serve the bread with butter.

Dr. Dana Driscoll, a professor of English at IUP, has been teaching wild food foraging, herbalism and sustainable living for more than 10 years.

The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.