

Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday**

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Knowing the type of oak you have is important as we move into hurricane season

At first glance, a majestic live oak and a laurel oak may look alike to most people. But there are some important differences that could be very important to you and your landscape over the years.

Pam Brown, Extension Agent in Pinellas County, tells us why it's important to know the difference between these native oaks.

Live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) belongs to the white oak group. It is a large, sprawling, picturesque tree that grows to a mature height of 60 to 80 feet with a spread of 60 to 120 feet with multiple trunks and many sinuously curved branches. The medium growth rate allows this tree to develop very strong wood that is quite resistant to decay. When given adequate room to grow and good growing conditions, these trees can live for 300 years or more.

These trees are very drought tolerant once established and have a moderate tolerance to salt. Adequate soil space is essential for live oaks. Roots will grow under curbs and sidewalks, when planted in confined spaces, and may lift sidewalks, curbs and driveways.

The leaves of the live oak are unlobed with a smooth edge. They are a lustrous green above and pale green with very fine fuzz on the underside. Live oaks will retain leaves until after the next year's foliage has appeared, making it a true evergreen. The acorns, found on long stalks, are about one inch long and are usually in clusters of three to five.

Laurel oak (*Quercus laurifolia*) belongs to the red oak group and is a tall, broad tree that grows to a height of 60 or more feet with a canopy spread of 40 to 60 feet. The canopy is a fairly symmetrical oval shape. The trunk flares out at the base lifting sidewalks and curbing if not given adequate space for growth. The fast growth rate of this tree results in relatively weak wood that is prone to break and decay.

Improper pruning cuts or injury to the trunk can result in severe decay that can hollow out the trunk or large branches creating a hazardous situation. Laurel oaks have a lifespan of 50 to 70 years when grown in ideal conditions. These trees are moderately drought tolerant and have a low salt tolerance.

The leaves of the laurel oak are smooth, thin and narrow. They are shiny green above and pale below with a yellowish midrib. The margins of the leaves are either smooth or irregularly lobed. Acorns are about 1/2 inch long, found singly, and attached directly to the twig. The bark is a dark reddish-brown, smooth in young trees but becoming deeply fissured with age.

Now, why is this important for you and your landscape? Research at the University of Florida has shown that the laurel oak is very prone to failure in hurricane winds due to the weak wood and their tendency to decay. Laurel oaks may not be appropriate to plant near a home or other structure.

The live oak, however, has deep roots and a relatively short height in relation to crown spread. That, along with strong wood, help the live oak to withstand the high winds and strong storm surges that can bring trees down during hurricanes.

Many arborists agree that old laurel oaks are especially susceptible to blow down in tropical storms. As hurricane season approaches, take a look at the trees in the landscape. Don't wait until the last minute to think about assessing and preparing your trees for storms.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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