

A Tale of Two Twigs

How to Tell One Tree from Another

THE SEASON OF LIGHT

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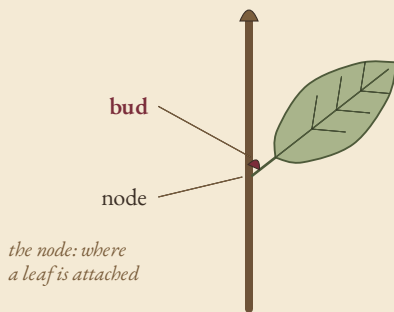


I Learn five words

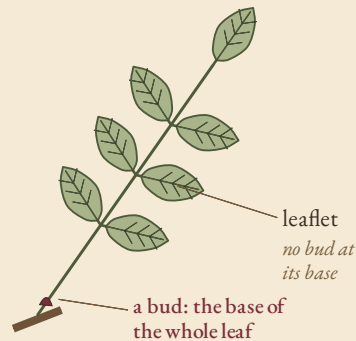
START HERE

Botanists use precise words so that two people who describe the same twig say the same thing, and this edition starts with five of them. The **node** is the point on a twig where a leaf is, or was, attached. A **bud** sits where the leafstalk meets the twig; therefore, a bud marks where a whole leaf begins. A **leaflet** is one part of a leaf that is divided into several parts, and a leaflet never has a bud at its base. A **lobe** is a large rounded or pointed part of a leaf, set off by deep notches, and a **bristle** is a stiff, hairlike point at the tip of a lobe.^{1,2}

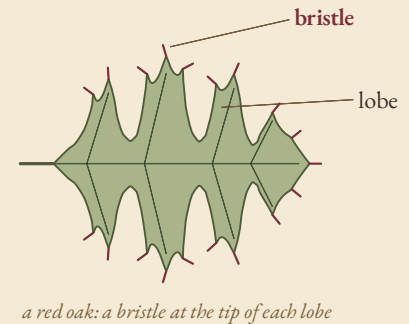
A TWIG



A LEAF WITH LEAFLETS



AN OAK LEAF



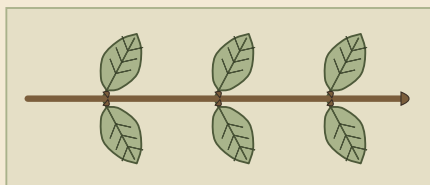
The five words, on a twig, a leaf with leaflets, and an oak leaf.

II Ask the first question: how are the leaves arranged?

Look first at how the leaves are attached to the twig. **Opposite** leaves grow in pairs, one on each side of the twig at the same node. **Alternate** leaves grow one at a node, staggered along the twig. A few trees carry three or more leaves at a node, which botanists call **whorled**. Most trees have alternate leaves.¹ Check several nodes, below the tip and on several twigs, before you decide, because oaks crowd leaves at the tip and a lost leaf can make a pair look alternate.^{1,3,4} Count leaves, not leaflets: each leaf in a true pair has a bud at its base.

Opposite

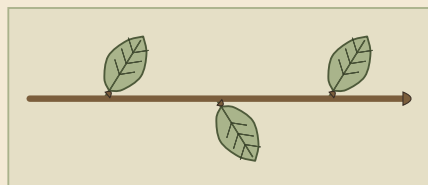
two leaves at each node



MAD CAP HORSE: five groups
section III

Alternate

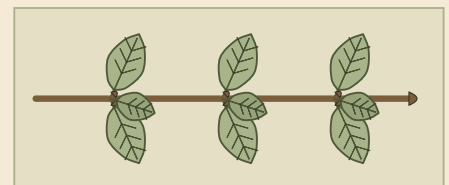
one leaf at each node



most trees: start with five clues
section IV

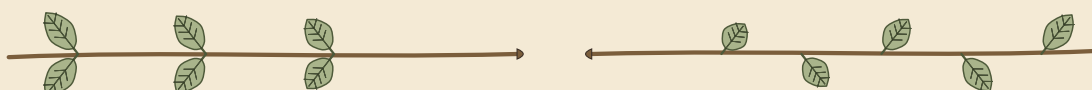
Whorled

three or more at each node



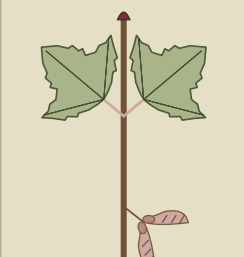
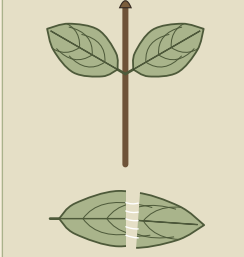
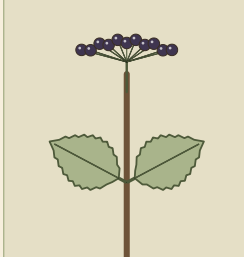
a few, such as catalpa and buttonbush
section III

The first question: how are the leaves arranged on the twig?



III If the leaves are opposite, think MAD CAP HORSE

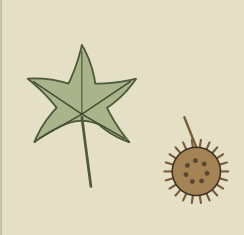
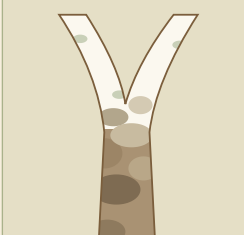
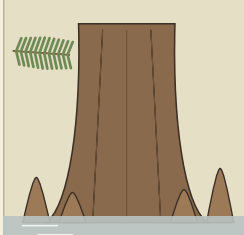
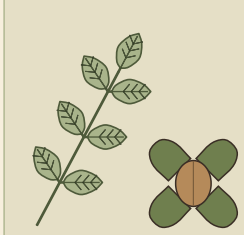
Most trees with opposite leaves belong to one of five groups, which forestry students remember as **MAD CAP HORSE**: maples, ashes, dogwoods, CAP (for Caprifoliaceae, the old honeysuckle family, whose trees in the Delta are viburnums and elderberry), and horse chestnut, with its native relatives, the buckeyes.¹ Each card below gives the clues for one group. A few other trees also have opposite leaves (e.g., catalpa, often with leaves in threes, and buttonbush); therefore, confirm with the fruit when you can.¹

				
M Maples A leaf lobed like a hand; paired winged keys. <i>Red and silver maples. Boxelder is a maple with leaflets.</i>	A Ashes Leaflets along a stalk, usually five to nine; fruits with one wing. <i>Green ash; pumpkin ash in swamps.</i>	D Dogwoods Smooth edges and veins that curve toward the tip; a torn leaf hangs on threads. <i>Roughleaf dogwood; flowering dogwood on drier ground.</i>	CAP Viburnums, elderberry Dark berries in flat-topped clusters. Viburnums have no leaflets; elderberry has toothed leaflets. <i>Possumhaw viburnum; elderberry along ditches.</i>	HORSE Buckeyes Five leaflets spread from one point, like fingers; a shiny brown nut. <i>Red buckeye, not in the low bottoms.</i>

Clues for each opposite-leaved group, with members in and around the Delta.^{1,5-9}

IV If the leaves are alternate, start with five easy clues

Most trees have alternate leaves, far too many to cover in four pages. However, several common Delta trees can be named from one clue each, and the five below are a good place to start.^{1,6,10,11} If a tree fits none of the five, record its leaf, fruit, and bark on the field card on the back page. To go further, I recommend the Peterson or Sibley guide for the backpack^{12,13} and, for twigs you take home to your own “laboratory,” a regional reference: *Trees of Arkansas, Know Your Trees, Louisiana Plant ID*, or the University of Arkansas Herbarium’s *Trees, Shrubs, and Woody Vines of Arkansas*. Readers elsewhere can find their state’s online.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

				
Oaks An acorn means an oak. <i>section V</i>	Sweetgum Star-shaped leaves and spiny gumballs. <i>fronts and ridges</i>	Sycamore Bark peels to white on the upper limbs. <i>fronts</i>	Baldcypress A conifer that drops its needles; knees rise from the water. <i>swamps</i>	Pecan, hickories Leaflets along a stalk; the husk splits in four. <i>pecan on fronts</i>

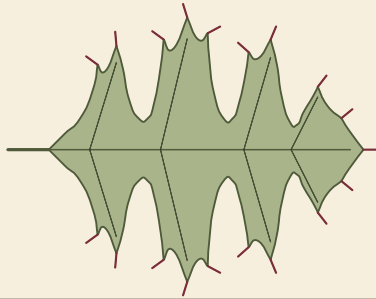
Five clues that name a tree, or a group of trees, at a glance, with where each grows; fronts are the high banks along a stream (page 3).

V Tell a red oak from a white oak

Oaks are among the most common trees in the Delta bottomlands, and every oak there belongs to one of two groups.¹¹ Look at the tips of the lobes. Red oaks have a bristle at the tip of each lobe, or at the tip of a leaf without lobes; white oaks have rounded lobes and no bristles. Red oak acorns are bitter and take two growing seasons to mature, and white oak acorns are sweeter and mature in one.^{3,10,18} The four oaks on the cards below are easy to learn first.

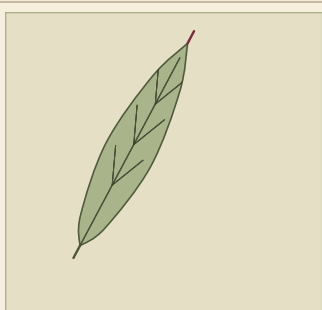
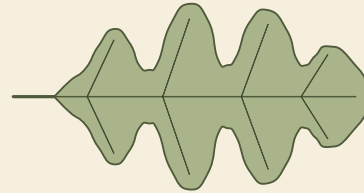
Red oak group

A bristle at the tip of each lobe



White oak group

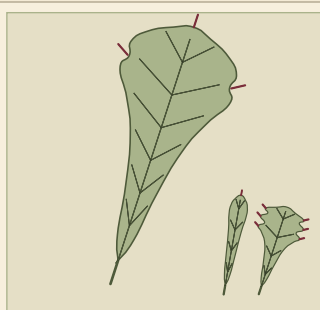
Lobes rounded, with no bristles



Willow oak

red oak group

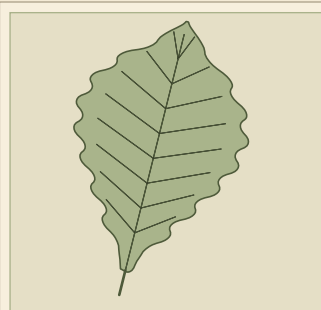
Narrow, like a willow leaf, with a bristle at the tip.



Water oak

red oak group

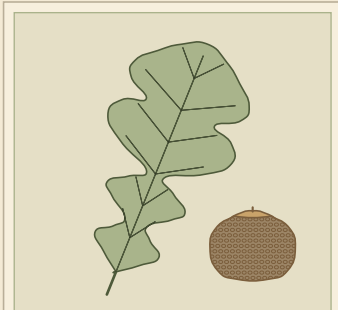
Spoon-shaped, widest near the tip; leaves vary, and some can look like willow oak or other oaks.



Swamp chestnut oak

white oak group

A big leaf edged with large, rounded teeth.



Overcup oak

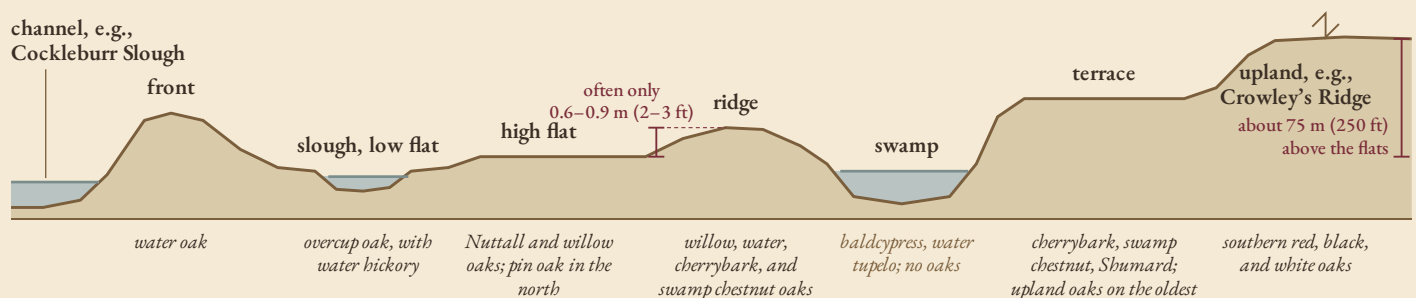
white oak group

An acorn almost enclosed by its cup.

The bristle test, and four Delta oaks to learn first.^{1,6,10,19}

VI Use your location

Where a tree grows helps tell what it is. Each Delta oak favors certain ground: overcup in the wet sloughs, Nuttall and willow oaks on the flats, and cherrybark and swamp chestnut oaks on the ridges, as the figure shows.^{6,11,20} Take care in towns, around homesteads, and anywhere else people have planted trees, because what we planted does not always follow what the land says should be there.



Where each oak grows, from the wettest sites to the driest; cherrybark and swamp chestnut oaks may be absent along the Mississippi River itself.^{6,11,20,21} Real land does not run left to right like the drawing, but each oak keeps to its kind of ground. Heights are exaggerated, and the upland is much higher than drawn.

Field card for an unidentified tree

Use one card per tree, and collect a twig with several leaves rather than a single leaf.

Place	Date	Tree number
1 Arrangement	☐ opposite ☐ alternate ☐ whorled · nodes checked _____	
2 Leaf	☐ no leaflets ☐ leaflets · how many leaflets _____	
3 Edge	☐ smooth ☐ toothed ☐ lobed · bristles ☐ yes ☐ no	
4 Fruit	☐ acorn ☐ keys ☐ dark berries ☐ nut in a husk ☐ gumball ☐ none	
5 Bark	☐ smooth ☐ peeling to white ☐ furrowed ☐ plated	
6 Ground	☐ wet ☐ in between ☐ dry · water in winter ☐ yes ☐ no	
7 Photographs	☐ whole tree ☐ twig with leaves ☐ leaf, both sides ☐ fruit ☐ bark	

Use the card with this guide in the same order: twig first, then leaf, then fruit.

Sources

Each source is shortened to its authors and year, where it was published, and its subject; the journal, volume, and pages, or the publisher or web address, find it.

- 1 **Virginia Tech.** Dendrology: tree identification primer and species fact sheets. dendro.cnrext.edu
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- 6 **Burns and Honkala 1990.** *Silvics of North America*, volume 2, *Hardwoods*. USDA Forest Service, Agriculture Handbook 654.
- 7 **Weakley and the Southeastern Flora Team.** *Flora of the Southeastern United States*. North Carolina Botanical Garden. fsus.ncbg.unc.edu
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- 21 **Stroud.** Crowley's Ridge. *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. encyclopediaofarkansas.net

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